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FROM

Mrs. L. S. Livingston,
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The Greatest of These

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES

EXTON MANOR

THE ELDEST SON

THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER

THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS

THE GREATEST OF THESE

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH

UPSIDONIA

The Greatest of These

By
Archibald Marshall

AUTHOR OF

"EXTON MANOR," "THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER,"
"THE ELDEST SON," ETC.



New York
Dodd, Mead and Company
1916

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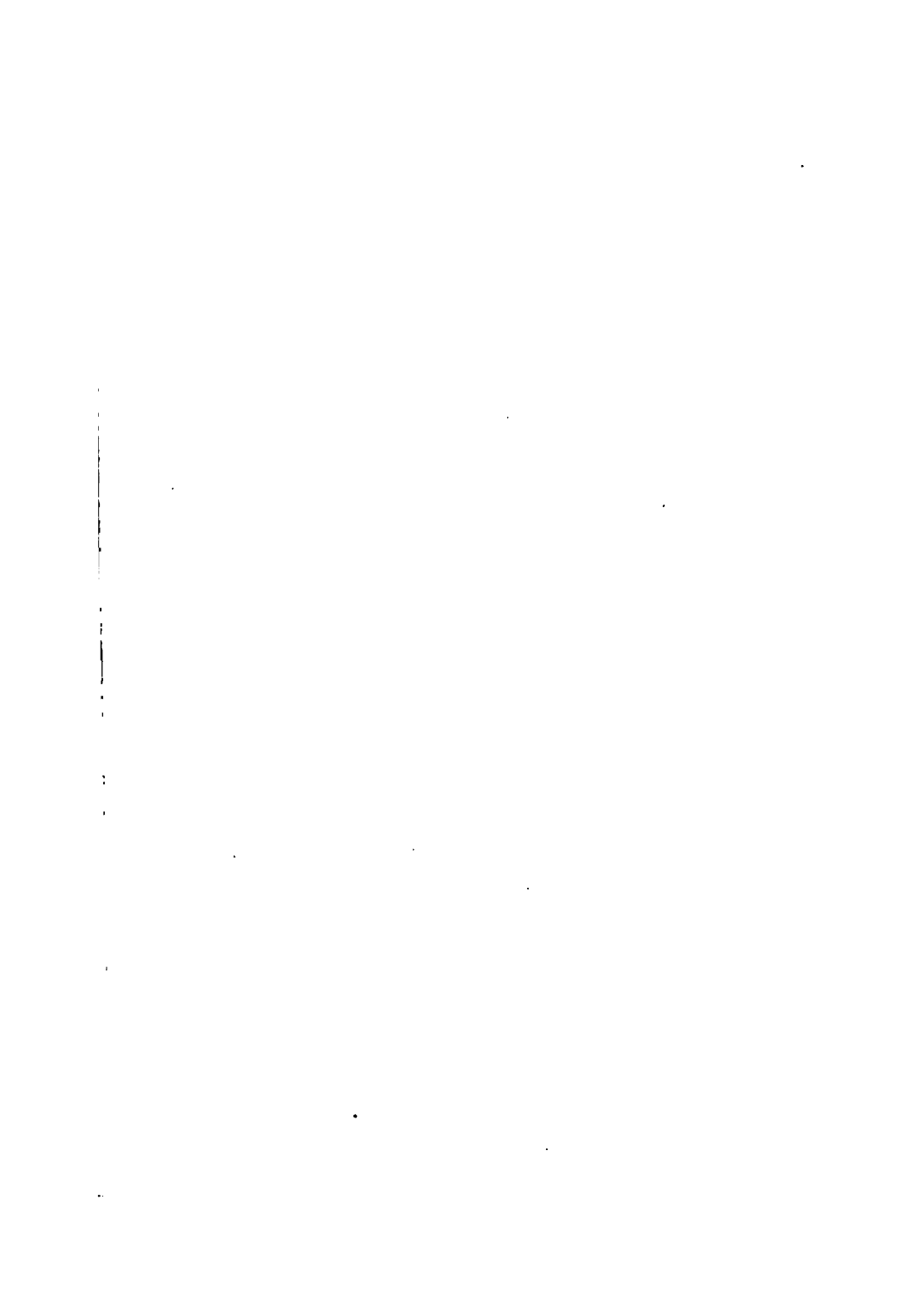
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The Greatest of These



CHAPTER I

AFTER CHURCH

THE choir sang a verse of a vesper hymn, unaccompanied, and the least little shade flat, the schoolmaster, who was also the choir-master, emphasising the tenor part; the congregation remained kneeling, while the organist, taking up the last note, rambled softly and lingeringly over the keyboard of the swell, and, upon the raising of heads, broke tumultuously into the March from "Athalie," which he had been practising during the previous week.

The choir filed out to these triumphant strains. Behind the boys and men walked the curate, a young man with a plain, honest, open-air face, and behind him the Rector, who, from the chancel steps, threw a momentary glance down the well-filled nave of the fine church. He was a handsome man of middle-age, with a look of mingled pride and benevolence, answering nicely to the aristocratic and the priestly of which he was compounded.

The little procession passed the length of the rectory pew, which was in front of the rest. If the habitually complaisant look on the Rector's face was stamped there in any part by satisfaction in the appearance of his family, which was ensconced there in full force, it was so far justified. His eldest son was like what he must have been himself at twenty-five, but with possibly plainer indications of intellect; the boy and girl of nine and ten, who stood on either side of their young-looking, pretty mother, had inherited points from both their parents; the girl of one-and-twenty, who was next to the little boy, had the charm of amiability to give expres-

sion to her regular and delicately rounded features; the boy of sixteen at the end of the pew, though at a confessedly unhandsome age, showed candour, and the family quality of tractability, which was apparent upon all these young faces.

The church emptied itself slowly, the Rector's family passing out by a door in the north aisle. A paved path led through the churchyard to a door in an old stone wall, on the other side of which was the large garden of the rectory.

A bitter wind was blowing, and they hastened with heads bent to get into shelter. The children clung to their mother, who ran with them, all three chattering and laughing.

One of the choir boys had dropped a hymn-book during the sermon, and Mr. Vigo, the schoolmaster, had given him "such a look." Their mother did not rebuke them for being on the look-out for such beguiling episodes. She had hardly been able herself to refrain from laughing at Mr. Vigo, who, obviously startled out of sleep, had sat up very suddenly and very straight, looking like nothing so much as an aroused terrier and had ended his glare of reprisal with a deprecatory glance at the rectory pew.

Once inside the house the slight aroma of ecclesiasticism which had hung about this happy, handsome family in their semi-official pew disappeared. The large drawing-room into which they trooped, to stand for a minute or two before the fire, was richly furnished and bright with flowers, although the month was January. All of them were very well dressed, the mother and daughter especially, as if clothes were an important item in their well-being. There were those in the parish of Roding who said that the Rector's family dressed and lived much more expensively than was fitting; but the general opinion was that their position in the world justified such expenditure.

The Rector was brother to Sir Richard French, and heir to his baronetcy; for Sir Richard was unmarried, and likely

to remain so. His wife was daughter to the Earl of Hampshire; and a temperamental inability to comport herself as the busy wife of a busy clergyman was regarded indulgently for the sake of her title.

The living of Roding was a poor one, considering the stately church and the bygone importance of the old town; but the rectory was a large Queen Anne house standing in the midst of grounds of some acres in extent, and possessing all the amenities of a not unimportant country house. A few concessions were made to its clerical character: there were, for instance, no indoor men-servants, and there was supper instead of dinner on Sunday evenings. Otherwise, it was as one of the houses in the country round, and treated as such by the country neighbours.

The Rector, however, took his profession seriously, was diligent in good works, and never forgot that he was a priest as well as a gentleman.

In a few minutes the group in the drawing-room was joined by George Barton, the curate, who came in, and was greeted as if he were one of the family. He wore a frock coat, and a white tie round a high layman's collar.

"Where is father?" asked Sylvia, the elder girl.

"Miss Budd had something to say to him," replied Barton.

Lady Ruth threw up her eyes. The two children looked at her and at one another with eager amusement. Ronald, the second boy, said in a voice of mimicry, but without smiling: "Mr. French, I think it my duty to tell you, as Rector of this parish, that the bag was handed to me this evening by a sidesman with soiled finger-nails. I mention no names, but I think it is right that you should know of these things."

"What's the trouble this time, George?" asked Ralph, the eldest son.

"I don't know that there's any trouble."

"You have no observation, George," said Ronald. "You could have told by the way her upper lip fitted on to her lower."

"Well, I hope she won't keep him long," said Lady Ruth. "We must go up. Sylvia, I am not going to dress. It is too cold."

George Barton went up to Ralph's room with him. They were of about the same age, and had been friends at school, and at Cambridge. Barton was a distant cousin of Lady Ruth's.

"I heard rather an interesting piece of news this afternoon," he said as he washed his hands, while Ralph quickly changed his clothes. "Who do you think is coming here as minister at the chapel?"

"How should I know?"

"Dr. Merrow—Dr. Edgar Merrow."

"The man who preached for them in the summer, that they had all the bills out about?"

"Yes. I met Gosset this afternoon. He was in a great state of excitement about it. He said, 'Well, Mr. Barton, you're not going to have it all your own way now. The great Dr. Merrow has accepted a call to our church, and will commence his ministry in a month's time.'"

"What on earth can he be coming here for? They only paid old Thompson a hundred and twenty a year. Hasn't this chap got a big place in London?"

"I hadn't time to talk long with Gosset, and he was so full of the idea of crowing over me that I didn't want to, much. I gathered that Dr. Merrow was ordered rest, but didn't want to give up his preaching altogether. He wants a quiet healthy place to settle down in. He has taken 'The Limes.'"

"Oh, then he must have money of his own. They couldn't pay him enough for that."

"According to Gosset, his wife is an heiress; 'equal to the highest,' he told me. I think that was a slap at Cousin Ruth."

"Gosset is an offensive beast. There was a fellow called Merrow who was President of the Union in our first term. I think he was at the Hall."

"Yes, that's Dr. Merrow's son. Dr. Merrow was at Oxford himself. I had it all from Gosset, whose idea seems to be that Oxford is rather a higher class place than Cambridge, and that the Rector and I will have to sing small on that account."

"I don't know that you sing very loud as it is, old chap. Dad was on very good terms with old Thompson. I hope this chap won't want to be always fighting."

"I don't think so. From what I've heard I should say he's one of the best of them. Besides, we're not extreme in any way. We do our job as well as we can, and don't worry about controversy."

Ralph looked at him with a smile of affection. "There's plenty to do without quarrelling, isn't there, George?" he said.

"Lots to do," said Barton, simply. "Religious controversy is a pestilent business."

Supper was over and they were all in the drawing-room again before the Rector came in. There had been much conjecture as to what could have kept him.

Lady Ruth went out to him in the hall when she heard him open and shut the door. It was past half-past nine.

He kissed her, when he had hung up his coat and hat. His face was disturbed.

"What is it, Henry?" she asked him.

"A bad business, my dear. Come and sit with me while I eat my supper, and I'll tell you all about it."

She saw that he was supplied with what he wanted, told the maid not to wait, and sat down near him.

"I wish the news had not come through Miss Budd," he said. "She will make the most of it."

"You are not bothered about this Dr. Merrow who is coming here, are you?" she asked.

He laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "There is nothing disturbing about that. I met him, you know, when he preached here, and was inclined to like him. No; it is something that I am glad doesn't often happen in Roding. You know that girl, Jane Morton, Miss Budd's maid?"

"Yes; a pretty girl. I should have liked to have her here. She is not ill, is she?"

"She is in trouble. You know what that means."

"Oh, Henry!"

Her face was suffused. She looked shocked, and deeply distressed.

"Miss Budd sent her home this afternoon. I have been to see her. Her father and mother are terribly upset. They are very respectable people; he works for Wetton. Do you know them—they live out on the Harbury Road?"

"I don't think I do. But she was such a bright, well-spoken girl. Oh, I am so sorry."

"I am afraid she has been what they call flighty, or this wouldn't have happened. Miss Budd declares that they let her go out to service because they could not look after her at home, and that she knew it when she took her, a year ago. She is the only child, and would naturally be at home, for Morton is Wetton's foreman, and they are quite well off."

"She is quite young, isn't she, Henry—not more than eighteen or nineteen?"

"She is not quite twenty yet."

"Poor child! How cruel it is!"

She had not asked him what she might have been expected to ask. He paused a moment before saying, almost awkwardly: "She says that it is young Gosset. Miss Budd got it out of her before she sent her away."

"How dreadful!" she said. "And I have always liked him too,—much better than his father. Henry, need Miss Budd have sent her away so quickly?"

"I'm afraid you must not look for any kindly action on Miss Budd's part in a case like this. She is angry with the girl, but still more anxious, I think, that trouble should come of it for Gosset. I shall have to go to him to-morrow morning and see what can be done."

"But what can be done? Shall I go and see the girl, Henry? She must be in such terrible distress; and her poor mother too. I think I remember her. She would not mind my going, would she? She would know I only wanted to be kind."

"Yes, go, my dear. The mother is very angry with her now; she thinks only of the disgrace to her respectability. She even talked of sending the girl away at once, to-morrow, until after the child is born. But I persuaded her to do nothing for the present."

"It is natural that she should be very much upset. But with what the girl must go through it would be cruel to send her away. She will want all the love and sympathy that she can get. I am sure her mother will feel that when she has had time to get over this shock. It will be something, perhaps, if I can show her that I feel very much for both of them; that other women will be sorry, and not hold aloof from them."

"My dear," he said, "it will be the best thing that you can do. If you are kind to them others will be less likely to hold aloof. Take it for granted that her mother will

keep her at home. But I know you will do and say exactly the right thing."

The three men were smoking in the Rector's study, later.

"Percy Gosset isn't a bad fellow," said George Barton, in his slow way. "If I had only had him with the rest I don't believe this would have happened."

"You don't keep your clubs to the boys who go to church, do you?" asked Ralph.

"Oh no. But Gosset has always prevented Percy from coming. I had a talk with him about it in the autumn. Percy played cricket all the summer; he shaped very well; I made friends with him, because I liked him. He wanted to join the club for the winter, and thought I might be able to persuade his father to let him. But it was no use. Gosset seemed to think that I wanted to proselytise, as he called it. He said that there was plenty going on in connection with the chapel, and he wanted his son to throw himself into that,—to follow in his own steps, he said. I saw it was no use persisting, so I had to leave it."

"I shall have a difficult task with Gosset," said the Rector. "He doesn't seem to be able to get it out of his head that we live in a state of constant rivalry with him and his chapel; and I am afraid he will think I am seizing the opportunity to belittle him."

"Especially as he is so exalted at the moment about this Dr. Merrow coming to Roding," said Ralph.

"What are you going to say to Gosset, Cousin Henry?" asked Barton. "What can he do?"

"Do you want young Gosset to marry the girl?" asked Ralph.

The Rector turned uneasily in his chair. "No," he said shortly, "I want him not to. How old is he? Just over twenty, they tell me. God knows I don't make light of his fault. But I don't want his life spoiled by it. They

would have nothing in common; they might be very unhappy together. The girl is attractive, but I don't like her. I don't think she is straight."

There was a slight pause. "You are not likely to have much difficulty with Gosset then," said Ralph.

"That's what I don't know. A man like that—frankly, I don't understand his religious attitude. You know that he gave up the off-license that he had in connection with his shop a year or two ago. He certainly lost money over it; all that trade goes to Barrow now. He issued a letter to his customers in which he explained his reasons, very temperately, not taking too much credit to himself for an act which he said his conscience induced him to take. You can't tell what a man like that may feel himself obliged to do. I shall have to be careful. I shall not mention marriage at all, unless he does. If I took up a common-sense position, he would be likely to oppose it with one based on strict religious views, for the sake of making me look like a man guided purely by a spirit of worldliness. That is his view of me and of the Church. We are opportunists. It is in the sects only that true Christianity is upheld."

"I don't think you will have much difficulty with him," said Ralph again. "He is much more likely to deny the whole thing. I suppose you are sure that it is young Gosset?"

"Yes, I am sure. It is the boy I am thinking of, more than anybody. George, I want you to get hold of that boy. He will be in great disgrace, with his father, and with all the people about him. Gosset has made him teach in their Sunday school, even preach, I believe, in outlying villages. Probably he is quite unfitted for it all. I hardly know him, but he looks to me like an ordinary, natural young fellow who would be much better employed, at his age, in playing games, and working off his steam in that way. From what I know of their ways they will turn him out of all the

occupations they have given him. He will be at a loose end. It will be the turning-point of his whole life. He may very well go wrong altogether. Make a friend of him; get him to occupy himself. Don't make light of his fault—I know you won't do that—but try and restore him to his self-respect. That's what I really want to do with Gosset—persuade him to let you have your chance with him."

"I'll do what I can," said Barton.

CHAPTER II

IN GOSSET'S PARLOUR

THE Rector shut to the door of his house and stepped out into the clear winter sunshine. The storm had blown itself out during the night and the air was still, though sharply prophetic of frost to come.

The broad front of the rectory faced on to a cobbled square. In front of it was a row of pollard limes; on the other side, the buildings of the old grammar school stretched their mellowed gabled length, and gave access to the square by a doorway leading from the school-yard. The front of the school was on the street on the other side, but a stretch of pavement running under the wall was a favourite perambulatory of the masters. The boys were not allowed to play in the square, which was as quiet as if it had been some cathedral close or college court. At one end of it rose the fine tower of the church, at the other was a little low-bred shop of antiquities, with a flagged passage running between it and the high wall of the rectory garden, and leading to the busier streets of the town.

The Rector took this passage and came out into the High Street, already in the flush of its Monday morning activities. He received many greetings, from tradespeople busy about their door and shop-fronts, and from their assistants, whose eagerness to set about another week's work after the Sunday's rest was probably less than that of their masters, but who yet showed some slight exhilaration at the welcome gift of January sunshine.

The Rector accepted salutations with an air of cordial

condescension. He was on good terms with his parishioners, who were proud of his handsome appearance, his aristocratic connections, and even of his slightly patronising manner, and liked to see him going about the streets of their old town, of which they were also proud, on his pastoral duties.

No one stopped him as he walked down the High Street. That would hardly have been done, although, if he had chosen himself to stop for a word or two with one or another, no press of business would have stood in their way of a chat as long as he might have liked to make it. This morning he would not have been averse to being stopped. He wanted to know whether the story that had been brought to him was yet common property.

Apparently it was not, for he detected nothing unusual in the manner of the salutations accorded to him, unless it was a slight surprise at seeing him about the town at such an early hour of the morning.

He went in at the open door of a large double-fronted shop, outside of which was boldly illuminated the legend: "Samuel Gosset, Grocer and Provision Dealer." Two carts, with the same inscription painted on them, stood in the roadway opposite, ready for their distributive journeys. Inside the shop, crowded with orderly merchandise, was much running to and fro of white-aproned and white-jacketed young men under the capable superintendence of Mr. Gosset himself, sleek, grey-bearded, smooth-voiced, dressed in two parts of a suit of black, with an apron to cover it, and shirtsleeves rolled up in spite of the chill air.

One of the white-clad young men beat a hasty retreat into the back premises upon the Rector's appearance; he caught no more than a glimpse of him.

Gosset came forward. "Good-morning, Mr. French," he said, with a friendly smile, in which there was a touch

of gratification, "you have caught me hard at it; but you won't expect me to apologize for that, I know."

"I wanted to have a word with you, Mr. Gosset."

"Certainly, sir; come in here, if you please. I'll just give an order or two and be with you in a moment."

He showed his visitor into a room, half office, half parlour, and left him there. There was a large desk with many papers on it, and with ledgers on brass rails above. On the walls were pictorial advertisement cards and almanacs, interspersed with Biblical mottoes, framed, and decorated either with pictured flowers, mountain scenery, or churches and churchyards under snow. On a table were books and printed papers, wholesale catalogues alternating with the proceedings of religious societies, trade papers with those devoted to the weekly amelioration and encouragement of the collective soul of the community. Above the mantelpiece was a large architectural drawing, showing plans and elevations of the building in which Mr. Gosset worshipped, and occasionally officiated.

The Rector was left alone long enough to reflect that the occasion of his visit could not yet be known, and that the coming interview would therefore be the more difficult.

Gosset came in and shut the door. "Well, Mr. French," he said, rubbing his cold hands together, "you will have heard our great news. I had the pleasure of introducing you to Dr. Merrow last year, but little thought then that we should have had the honour of welcoming him permanently amongst us. I look for great things from his ministry, Mr. French. We want waking up, sir, all of us, church and chapel alike, and this is the man to do it—a scholar and a gentleman, and what's a great deal more than either, a man of great spiritual power and fervour."

"I shall be glad to welcome Dr. Merrow when he comes,"

said the Rector. "But I haven't come to talk about him, Mr. Gosset. A very painful thing has happened, which I see I must be the first to break to you. I am very sorry to have to do so—very sorry indeed—a little for my own sake, but a great deal more for yours."

He spoke in his usual full-throated, rather domineering voice, which had always had its effect on this listener, causing him many a time to defer unwillingly to implied superiority, in circumstances in which he would have preferred to bear himself as an equal.

But there was sympathy in this speech, as well as authority. Gosset's face changed, showing apprehension, and a hint of watchfulness.

"It is about your son. He has made friends with a young girl—Jane Morton. She is in trouble; she accuses him."

Whatever Gosset may have expected, it had been nothing of this sort. He started and crimsoned.

"What, Percy!" he exclaimed. "What are you saying, Mr. French? Who has told you this wicked lie?"

"I'm afraid it is the truth. I saw the girl last night."

"She said it was he? She was not telling the truth. He has been brought up in a God-fearing home; he has already begun to throw himself into religious work. Oh, it is a monstrous accusation! Who is this girl? I don't know her name. Who is she, Mr. French?"

He spoke with strong indignation, and suddenly, as if he had just become aware that this was a matter in which he must be supported by a sense of his own dignity, he whipped off his white apron, then rolled down his shirt-sleeves and put on the frock coat which was hanging behind the door.

"She is the daughter of Wetton's foreman. I believe they have not been very long in Roding."

Gosset turned round sharply; he was just taking his coat

off the hook. "Oh, then I do know who she is," he said. "I remember her name now. She is Miss Budd's servant. She came to our chapel one evening for the week-night service, and I had a little talk with her as she went out. Then that accounts for it. It is Miss Budd who has told you this story, Mr. French; and you have accepted it from her, as against me, without any further corroboration."

"Mr. Gosset, I am afraid there is no doubt of what the truth is. Your son has been with this girl a good deal of late. You can satisfy yourself of that; he has——"

Gosset broke in upon him with sharp emphasis: "Miss Budd would rejoice beyond everything in doing damage to me and the cause I represent. It is she who has put this story into the girl's mouth. I say it is a wicked falsehood, Mr. French, and it ill becomes you as a minister of religion to accept the word of a woman of that character against a man whose earnest desire it is to uplift the lives of those about him—a man whom you don't see eye-to-eye with—I know that well enough—but——"

The Rector held up his hand authoritatively, making his voice heard through the flood of angry speech poured out by the other, and bringing it to a stop. "Mr. Gosset," he said, "I beg you to hear me out. This is not a question of taking the word of a third party; I would not dream of doing such a thing in a case like this. I have told you that I have seen the girl myself. I am convinced that her story is true. Your son has written her letters—compromising letters. They can only bear one interpretation."

Gosset's face showed him to have been hit. "Where are the letters?" he asked. "I can't believe that they can prove him to have been so wicked."

"I am afraid they do prove what I have told you. I have them in my keeping."

"Have you got them here, Mr. French?"

"No. They are locked up. I don't wish to show them to you; I don't wish to show them to anybody. When the time comes I will destroy them. If you like, I will do so in your presence."

"How did they come into your possession, Mr. French? Did this girl give them to you?"

"Miss Budd gave them to me. She found them yesterday afternoon. I asked her to let me have them, and asked her also to promise me to mention them to nobody; which she did."

"Miss Budd!" said Gosset bitterly. "It comes back to Miss Budd. Yes, sir, if this story were true, she would very readily promise not to mention finding letters. No doubt, when the girl was out, she went searching about in her room; it is what she would do."

"It is what she did do," said the Rector uncompromisingly. "She gave me reasons for having done so, but I neither defend nor censure her action. It need not concern us in so serious a matter."

"Pardon me, Mr. French; it concerns me very deeply. Miss Budd nourishes the deepest enmity towards me and all that I represent. She would stick at nothing to damage me. She poses as a strict supporter of—of your denomination, and I don't blame you for shielding her up to a certain point. But——"

Again the Rector broke in on him and bore him down. "Mr. Gosset, let us leave questions of denomination aside; they have nothing whatever to do with this affair. In so far as I have acted at all, I have acted with a view of sparing you as much distress as possible, and my only desire in coming here is to be of service to you and to your son. He has committed a grave fault and must bear the consequences of it; but while I blame him I am sorry for him. And I want to do what I can to put him right with himself."

"If it is true," said Gosset, more quietly, "it is not himself he wants to be put right with; it is the righteous God he has offended. But I don't yet believe it is true, Mr. French," he added, raising his voice again. "You won't let me say what I have in my mind——"

"No, I won't let you say it. It is not worthy of you. You can satisfy yourself of the truth of what I tell you very easily. Send for your son. Ask him whether it is true or not. Ask him now."

Gosset was silent, his eyes bent on the ground, his face troubled.

He raised his eyes, and there were opposition and jealousy in them. "If this is true, Mr. French," he said, "it is a very dreadful thing. Of course I shall speak to Percy, and get the truth out of him; and then I shall take what steps appear to me to be best. I can't say anything more to you at present—except that I should like to have those letters, if you please. They ought to be in my hands, not yours."

"Why, Mr. Gosset?"

"Because they concern me and my family, and no one else. I suppose I ought to thank you for getting them from Miss Budd, and keeping them safe; well, I do thank you. But, if you'll excuse me saying so, this is a matter for me now, not you."

"I can't take that view, Mr. Gosset. There is not only you to consider, nor even you and your son. There is the girl herself, and her parents. The punishment will fall more hardly on them than on you; you mustn't forget that. I have said very little about that side of the question; but it cannot be ignored."

The knowledge of the disgrace that was coming upon him suddenly overcame Gosset. He had ceased to disbelieve, or to affect to disbelieve the story. He wrung his hands. "Oh, how can you say that the punishment will

fall more heavily on them?" he cried. "It will fall on me terribly. It will give all my enemies occasion to blaspheme. I have many enemies—you know that I have, Mr. French—people I've never wronged in any way, but who hate me for the good work I am doing—people like Miss Budd—even you yourself, you would be glad if I were less active——"

"You are talking foolishly. No man is hated for doing good work. As for me, I bear no enmity towards you; it is a very unfair thing to say. I have never shown it, or felt it. My own work keeps me very fully employed; I am not always thinking, as you seem to suppose, of the few people here in Roding, like yourself, who prefer other forms of religion. If there is any rivalry, it is on your side, and not on mine. Let us leave your religious activities out of the question."

Gosset was hardened by this speech, which did not altogether lack the note of arrogance. "We have been a small folk," he said with some stiffness, "but in the time that is coming we shall be stronger. The Church has been all-powerful here; but places like Roding do not represent the religious life of the country. We shall fall more into line with the centres of thought. In my humble way I shall have a share in the changes that are coming, and you will not expect me, Mr. French, to shrink from speaking plainly to you, as I have always done; although nothing need be said or done that would cause either of us to forget our common Christianity."

"No, it need not," said the Rector, with some impatience. "Gosset, I wish you would put these matters out of your head. They have nothing whatever to do with what I have come here about. I can see as plainly as you can that, coming just at this time, when you are preparing to welcome your new minister, this affair must be peculiarly

distressing to you, and you have my fullest sympathy on that account. But *you* have done nothing wrong, man. Act rightly in this matter, and no one will have cause to blame you in any way. As far as it rests with me, I shall take care that they do not."

Gosset put this aside. "Well," he said, with a motion of his head, "I must accept what God has sent me. We need not talk about that. These letters—I hope you will see that it is right that I should have them."

"I don't see that it is right, and they will remain in my keeping."

Gosset rose from his chair. "Then in that case, Mr. French," he said, "you are acting towards me with hostility. I must take my own line, and if it brings me up against you, I can't help it."

The Rector sat still. "Just think a bit," he said, with unmoved countenance. "I have got those letters away from those who might have used them in a way very painful to you. I have seen these Mortons—the girl's father and mother—who have it in their power to damage you vindictively, and for the moment they will do nothing without my advice. Does that look like acting out of hostility to you? They are the injured parties—not you—and I might very well have taken their side, as against you and your son. I should have done that if I had been actuated by the petty jealousy that you seem determined to lay to my charge. Can't you see that I am doing what I can to help you, and put some confidence in me?"

"Well, sir, what you say is true up to a certain point," said Gosset unwillingly. "What is it you want of me?"

"I want you to send for your son. We are losing time. The story must be spreading, even now while we are sitting here talking."

"What do you want him to do? What are you going

to say to him? Oh, what a terrible thing it is! It is overwhelming me."

"Send for the boy, Gosset. Send for him now, at once."

Gosset was conquered by his insistence, and by the reminder that events were moving. He went to the door and called loudly for his son.

"I will speak to him," he said, coming back into the room. "Let me speak to him, sir."

The boy came in. He was a good-looking boy, with fair hair and blue eyes, and looked younger than his years. He was as white as the clothes he was wearing. There was little need for any one to speak to get at the truth.

"Is this story I have heard of you true?" his father asked him severely.

"Yes," he said, in a frightened whisper.

"You have deceived me and deceived God, and while you professed to be leading a clean life, and showing others the way of salvation, you have been a hypocrite, committing the deepest and most horrible of sins. How long has this been going on?"

"I met her first at the Harvest Festival, in September."

He faced his father, and spoke in a stronger voice, as if bracing himself to make a clean breast of it.

"Ah! You asked me to let you go to church that evening. I remember you wanted to hear the special preacher, you said. And what you really wanted was to meet this girl."

"No, father. I met her afterwards, coming out."

"Well, it's all one. And it shows the effect that such a service has. These excitements are not part of true religion. If I had only been faithful enough to refuse permission—not to have let you desert, even once, the simple service of praise and supplication that gives us such strength against evil!"

The Rector sat silent, but his brows were bent in a frown.

"Well then, you began to sin then; and you have gone on sinning ever since—deliberately sinning, while all the time you were professing to lead a religious life, encouraging me to believe that you were becoming more and more bound up in the things that really matter—teaching the young, all the time foul with sin yourself, going off to lead services, and perhaps even—I don't know—meeting this woman on your way there and back. Did you do that?"

"I only went once—to Blaythorpe—just after. When you wanted me to go to Kimmering, I said I would rather not."

"Don't add prevarication to your sin. Did this girl go with you to Blaythorpe?"

"Yes, she did. It was before there was anything wrong."

"Before there was anything wrong! You say that! And you met her coming out of church, spoke to her, concealed everything! Why did you conceal it if there was nothing wrong?"

"Mr. Gosset," said the Rector, "I think it is clear what he means. He would not have taken her to a religious service after their relations with one another had become guilty. He refused to hold a service after that; he was not willing to add hypocrisy to his sin."

The boy threw a grateful look at him. "I am very sorry for what I have done," he said with a choke. "I have been very unhappy about it for a long time. I'm glad it has all come out. I couldn't go on living as I have been."

He broke down and shed tears. They did not seem unworthy of him; he was just like a boy had up before his elders for a boyish fault.

"Well, what do you propose to do now?" asked his father rhetorically.

"I will marry her," said the boy, still weeping. "I know

I've done wrong, and it's much worse for her than it is for me. I'll make up to her for it all I can."

Gosset's face was dark. "Marry her!" he exclaimed. "You marry! What will you marry on, I should like to know. Am I to keep you and the partner of your crime, and let you both mix with your innocent brothers and sisters? You think that's the way out of it?"

The Rector was conscious of a feeling of relief, mixed with slight disgust.

Gosset roused himself suddenly. "You can go away," he said roughly. "I can't bear the sight of you. Take off that jacket and apron. Go up to your room, and don't leave it till I come to you."

He seemed a different man, violent and vulgar. The boy turned away to obey him, and then turned again towards the Rector. "I'm very sorry for what I've done, Mr. French," he said. "I'll do all I can to put it right, if you'll talk it over with father. And I haven't wanted to act the hypocrite."

He seemed about to say more, but his father broke in on him harshly, and he obeyed his command and left the room.

"He is sorry," said the Rector, immediately the door had been shut. "Don't be too hard on him, Gosset. He is very young, and I think we may say he has been led away, though the girl is no older. Help him out of his trouble."

"Yes, of course he has been led away," said Gosset, still speaking roughly. "They are a wicked lot, many of the girls in the town, and it's done this one no good to be in service where she has, I'll be bound. But it's no excuse for him that he's been led away. Marry her, indeed! A pretty thing for me to have a woman like that for my daughter-in-law! A pretty figure I should cut! Might

as well go away from the place altogether, and own that all I've been trying to do here is useless."

The Rector felt himself increasingly hostile, but kept his feelings under. "I don't think it is necessary or desirable that he should marry her," he said, "though his desire to do so does him credit."

"Does him credit!" repeated Gosset contemptuously, and with a look of dislike and strong opposition. "It would suit you, Mr. French, wouldn't it, if I were to be saddled with a woman like that for my daughter-in-law? All the people who go to church would be able to point their fingers at me—Miss Budd, and the rest of them. I should be a man whose power had gone—moved out of the way—put out of action."

"Whatever power you may have, Gosset, isn't increased by an attitude like that," said the Rector quietly. "You were talking in a very different strain just now."

Gosset passed his hand across his brow, and seemed to make an effort to recollect himself. "I get carried away," he said, in a quieter tone. "It's all very well for you to take it coolly, Mr. French, but this is a very terrible blow to me, and I can't see my way at all plainly. It keeps on coming over me, what a frightful disgrace it is."

"I believe if you were to think less of yourself, and more of others who are concerned, it might not be so difficult to see your way. You don't think of marriage as a solution. Very well; I agree with you, though not for the same reasons as appeal to you. I think it might be a life-long punishment for a slip made in youth and already repented of—a punishment that should be averted. But——"

"A slip you call it!" said Gosset. "I call it a deep and almost unforgivable sin against a just and offended God. I'll have no palliation of such an offence, Mr. French. Our ways of looking at these things are different."

"They are different," said the Rector, not without indignation. "As far as I can see, you have given no thought whatever to the consequences of what you call an unforgivable sin, except as they apply to yourself. You asked your son just now what he proposed to do, and you have nothing but scorn for his suggesting what many would consider the only honest solution of his fault. What do you propose to do with regard to this girl he has got into trouble? Leave her to fight it out for herself?"

The question was not answered for the moment. As the Rector finished speaking, signs of an altercation were heard outside, the door was opened, and a man in working clothes came into the room, and shut it behind him. The Rector recognised him as Morton, the father of the girl of whom they had been speaking.

CHAPTER III

MORTON HAS HIS SAY

MORTON recognised the Rector's presence by a motion of his hand to his forehead, and addressed Gosset, who had risen from his seat.

"They said you was busy," he explained, "but I thought you wouldn't be too busy to see me; and if I'd stopped out there in the shop I might 'a let out in a way you wouldn't 'a liked in front of all them respectable young men. So I made so bold as to come in where I saw you was and without being arst."

He spoke with slow and ironic weight, fixing his eyes upon Gosset, who did not find it easy to meet them. He was a big man, with heavy rounded shoulders, and a somewhat truculent expression of face. "I suppose you know my name without being told," he said. "It's Morton." Then he sat down on a chair, unbidden, and leant forward with his elbows on his knees, swinging his cap in his hands.

Ordinarily, the Rector would have said something to show himself controlling the situation, or at least as one who must not be ignored in it. But now he sat with his eyes on Gosset, waiting for him to speak.

Gosset's face had changed through expressions of surprise, alarm, confusion, to one of mild deprecation, which was an expression that it not infrequently wore. "I have just been told, Mr. Morton," he said, after clearing his throat, "of the dreadful thing that has happened. You can imagine how it has upset me, so that I hardly know what to say or to think about it."

"Oh, it's upset you, has it?" said Morton. "Well, it's upset me too, and I do know what to say about it. You're a man as puts himself pretty high above the likes of us, aren't you? You're a good man, you are, a religious man, what preaches to his neighbours, and wishes they was all as good as what he is. I got it right, haven't I?"

"Mr. Morton," said Gosset nervously, "I am just as sorry as you are for what has happened. It has been a terrible blow to me. I'm ready to talk it over with you and see what can be done to put it right."

"Oh yes, we're coming to that," said Morton. "But first of all I want to know if I got it right. I 'aven't been here more'n six months or so. You are the Mr. Gosset what's so busy preaching when you aren't selling groceries, and so ready in coming down on them as likes 'alf a pint now and then, aren't you?"

"I am pretty well known in Roding," said Gosset, not without dignity. "I am interested in religious work, and temperance work, as is well known here; but I don't see what that has to do with the unfortunate affair that I suppose you have come about."

"Oh! Well, I do see what it has to do with it, then." He shifted his position and changed his tone. "Why can't you keep your own family from interfering with other people's? Do a bit o' preaching to them, 'stead of letting them bring shame and trouble on them as 'as 'eld up their 'eads in their spere just the same as what you 'ave in yours?"

"The shame and trouble fell upon me too," said Gosset. "The knowledge that my son has behaved so wickedly is a great grief to me. I have tried to keep him from evil ways and from evil companions; I had no idea until this news came to me only just now that he was addicted to them. I have tried to bring all my children up in the way they should go."

The Rector intervened. "You have no reason to blame

Mr. Gosset for what has happened, Morton," he said. "If you have come here to say anything, say it out."

"My girl is in trouble," said Morton. "Your son has got her into trouble. What are you going to do about it, Mr. Gosset—you with all your ideas of being better than other folks? That's what I want to know. That's what I come here to say. Now then!"

He leant back in his chair, and fixed his eyes upon Gosset's face.

Gosset's eyes dropped. "I have hardly had time to think about it at all," he said. "Whatever I can do—whatever is right—I will do."

"Whatever is right! Well, what is right?"

There was no answer.

"Come now, Mr. Gosset, what is right, when a young man goes with a young woman and gets her into trouble?"

"Morton," began the Rector; but Morton held up his hand.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "me and Mr. Gosset is going to have this out between us. You done and said nothing but what's right by us; and your good lady, she's with my missus now, and a good lady she is, with a kind and tender 'eart. But all that's for by-and-by. I asked Mr. Gosset a question, and I want an answer from Mr. Gosset."

Gosset roused himself. "I'll give you my answer," he said in a hard voice. "I don't admit that what has happened is owing to my son. It may be and it may not be. I don't know your daughter or anything about her, and I shall ask a good many questions here and there before I commit myself in any way."

The Rector held himself in readiness for an outbreak from Morton, and Gosset may have expected one too, for he seemed to be bracing himself, and sat upright, facing his

antagonist with a troubled face, but with the light of battle in his eyes.

But Morton's red face became only a little redder. "Oh, that's your answer, is it?" he said. "And supposing you do ask your questions here and there, and find out as she was a good girl afore she come to know your son, and there's never no doubt but what it's from him as her trouble comes—what then? What are you going to do then?"

"I shall pay money to help her through her confinement, and I shall pay for the bringing up of the child, in good surroundings, so that it shall never know that it was born in sin, and so that the mother as well as the father can put behind them the sin they have committed, and——"

"Oh, you'll do that, will you? The child is to be took away from the mother as well as from the father?"

"Yes, I should make that stipulation. The child should be brought up in a religious home, but it should not be born in Roding or brought up in Roding."

"So as it shouldn't be brought up against you when you go preaching and holding forth!"

"You can put whatever interpretation on my words you please. My character is too well known for me to care what you can say against me. I've answered your question fairly. If I'm convinced that my son is the guilty party, and the only guilty party, I'll take my share of the burden for him. But I've told you already that I shall be hard to convince; and I'll tell you this further, that you're not going the right way about it if you want anything from me at all."

"If I want anything from you! That's your answer then! You don't think, by any chance—you being a religious man, and a shining light to the likes of me—that if a young man gets a young woman into trouble, he ought to marry that young woman, and put her right, and put the child right that's going to be born, and that's his as well as hers? I

just arst for information, you know, as to 'ow far your religion does carry you in a case like this."

"I have already given you my answer as to what I should be prepared to do."

"Yes, you told me that. But I want a plain answer to a plain question. Do you think it's right, when a young man gets a young girl into trouble, for that there young man to marry that there young girl? Do you or don't you?"

"In this case I don't think so."

Morton nodded his truculent head. "Very well; now we got it," he said. "That's the chapel view." He turned to the Rector. "Now then, Mr. French," he said. "Let's have the church view. What do you think about it?"

The Rector looked him full in the face. "You shall have my own view," he said, "the view of a man who has lived in the world and kept his eyes open. In some cases it may be the best thing for the man to marry the girl; but the marriage does not wipe out the fault, which has been committed, and cannot be undone. I should say that in the majority of cases such marriages would lead to unhappiness, and neither the man nor the girl would be the better for them. In this particular case, I do not think that they ought to marry."

"That's the church religion, then? The same as the chapel."

"I do not speak for the Church. I speak for myself, with a full sense of the responsibility I hold as an officer of the Church. And I speak only as to the present occasion. In another case I might speak differently."

"And why don't you think they ought to marry, in this particular case?"

"Mr. Gosset's son is very young, hardly more than a boy. He is——"

"You don't think 'e'd make a good 'usband, then? I

thought 'e seemed a nice young feller, what I seen of 'im, which ain't much."

The Rector's healthy colour became a shade deeper. "I see what you are driving at, Morton," he said. "I won't shirk it. It is the boy I am thinking of chiefly. It might ruin his life to marry now, at his age, and under such circumstances. It would not be a suitable marriage for him, even if they had come together without this sin between them. One would try to stop it, if one had any influence. But I am not thinking of him entirely. A woman's happiness is bound up in her husband's; you can't separate them. When the disillusion came, she would suffer just as much as he would."

"But it *might* turn out right, mightn't it? If 'e's got the grit in 'im, 'e'd make the best of it, wouldn't 'e? And if 'e was a kind 'usband, she'd do 'er best to be grateful-like to 'im. And there'd be the child between them. We're flesh and blood, Mr. French, us as works with our 'ands. My girl's flesh and blood, same as the son of Mr. Gosset, 'ere, what sells groceries on week-days and preaches on Sundays. They'd 'ave their child, and their 'ome. Come now, Mr. French, it might turn out all right, mightn't it?"

"It might," said the Rector. "The risks are very great."

"Well, then, if they don't marry! The lad goes off and forgets all about it. 'E's 'ad 'is fun, and 'e's 'ad 'is lesson. 'E'll take good care that 'e don't get into trouble that way again. P'raps 'e'll grow up the same as 'is father, what sells groceries on week-days and preaches on Sundays. There'll be nothing to prevent 'im, will there?"

Gosset moved uneasily in his seat, and cleared his throat, as if about to speak.

But Morton turned to him. "You keep out of it," he said roughly. "You've 'ad your say. I want to know what Mr. French thinks about it."

"I do think," said the Rector, "that a sin of this nature, committed in early youth, ought not overshadow a man's whole life; and that it need not do so, if it is repented of. I don't say that it ought to be forgotten, or taken lightly in any way."

"All right then. We've settled the young man. 'E's out of it now; we can put 'im aside. Now what about the young woman? Supposin' she repents, and don't forget it; and I'll lay she won't forget it, with a baby 'anging on to her breast; and won't take it lightly neither. What about overshadowing the young woman's life? What's going to become o' *her*?"

The Rector was silent, but he still kept his eyes upon Morton's face, now wearing a look of open triumph, and there was trouble in them, as if he were searching for an answer to questions that cannot be answered.

"What's going to become 'o *her*?" asked Morton again.

The Rector frowned. "I think it is you who are taking it lightly," he said. "You seem to think more of gaining an advantage in argument than of the very serious situation we have to consider. Do you want this marriage? And why do you want it?"

"What a question to ask, now! Do I want my girl made an honest woman of? Do I want 'er on my 'ands with an illegitimate child, for all the religious people of this 'ere town to throw mud at? They're a charitable lot, religious folk, aren't they? Mr. Gosset now—supposin' it 'ad been anybody else but his own son as was the father of the child as is going to be born!—'e'd 'ave a amiable way with a young woman who'd made a mistake of that sort, wouldn't 'e? Wouldn't 'alf look down 'is nose at 'er!"

Gosset rose from his chair. His face was hard. "We've had enough of this," he said. "My son isn't going to marry your daughter, put it how you like. Bad isn't going to be

made worse. But I'll do what I said I'd do, and when I've made the enquiries that I'm going to make, you can come and see me again."

"That's your last word," said Morton, still keeping his heavy seat. "And what's yours, Mr. French? The man goes free, and the girl stands the racket. That's what your religion teaches, is it? I on'y want to know. I on'y want to 'ave it plain."

The Rector answered him at once. "Neither of them goes free," he said. "The woman bears more than the man. Yes; that's in the nature of things. The woman always bears more than the man."

Morton seemed to have got what he wanted. He made a motion of rising; but before he did so, the door opened and the boy came in.

His face was white and distracted; the marks of the tears he had been shedding were on it. He went straight towards Morton. "I knew you were here," he said. "I've come to say that I want to marry Jane as soon as I can. It's the only thing I can do. I want to do what's right. It's been my fault, and I won't let her take all the punishment for it."

Gosset expostulated angrily at his presence, but Morton waved him aside with his big hand. "Wait a bit," he said. "'Ere's the party himPLICATED. 'E's been brought up in a religious 'ome, 'e 'as. Let's 'ear what 'e's got to say. Now then, youngster, speak up."

"I'm ready to marry her," said the boy, speaking more quietly. "I've done very wrong, and I'm sorry for it. I know I can't put the wrong right; but I'll do what I can."

"Well, 'ere's an offer of marriage at last," said Morton, with cumbrous jocularitY. "'Ere's a young gentleman asking me for my daughter's 'and. Very gratifying to a father's feelings, I'm shore. And what 'ave you got to live

on, young man, may I ask. 'Ow are you going to support a wife—and a family?"

"He has nothing but what I choose to give him," said Gosset angrily. "He——"

"Once for all, you keep out of it till I've done," said Morton menacingly; and Gosset shrank into silence. The Rector kept his seat, and looked from one to another with watchful interest.

"Well, we'll put the money out of the question for the present," said Morton. "P'raps I might be able to find you a job myself; or 'elp you a bit, till you come to earn your own living. I got a bit laid by. But there's one or two things I want to have plain first. When a young man wants to marry a young girl, 'e gen'ly says somethink about lovin' of 'er, don't 'e? They ain't likely to get on very well unless they take to one another more than ordinary. What about that part of the business, young man?"

"I'll make her a good husband," said the boy with downcast eyes. "I shan't forget what she has to go through because of me. I'll look after her. I'll make her a good husband."

"And my girl's the girl you'd choose to marry, even if there 'adn't been this little mistake between you?"

The boy was silent.

"Well, you don't seem to speak up very ready. Looks almost as if, now you'd 'ad your fun, you was wantin' to pay for it, cos' you think you ought, not because you want to."

There was no answer.

Morton threw his cap down on the table, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Now I'll tell you what," he said, looking at all three of them in turn. "There ain't going to be no marriage between the daughter of Jim Morton, Esquire, builder's

foreman, and the son of Mr. snivelling psalm-singing Gosset. It's me that won't 'ave it, not you. My girl's made a slip, and she'll 'ave to pay for it; and what she can't pay for I'll pay for 'er. I don't want your dirty money, you, Gosset! You can save it up for the missionaries. You're a canting 'umbug; that's what you are. If you'd acted as I knowed quite well you wouldn't act when I come in, I'd never 'ave said another word against you. And you'd 'a come off just as well, too, for I never wanted no marriage, and never meant to 'ave none neither."

"I'll pay for the girl's confinement," said Gosset doggedly, "and towards the upbringing of the child."

"No, you won't. You won't pay nothing. You've 'ad your chance of be'aving like what you pretend to be, and you've chucked it away. You ain't going to set yourself right by paying money. The child's going to be born in my 'ouse, and it's going to live in my 'ouse. I dessay I shall take to it. I'm fond o' kids, and it won't make no difference to me that it wasn't born in 'oly wedlock. You'd like to bury it out o' sight; but it won't be buried out o' sight. You'll often see it about, when it grows a bit; but there's one place you won't see it, and that's in your 'umbuggin' chapel."

"The child will be mine as well as hers," said the boy.

Morton laid a huge paw on his shoulder. "Don't you worry no more, sonny," he said. "You shall come and see it as often as you want to, if your old goat-beard of a dad'll let yer. You're a good lad. You was ready to do the straight thing, and I don't bear no malice against you. What you done, you done, as any young man would with a girl who 'adn't got the sense to look after 'erself. That's my way of looking at it, and I warn't a plaster saint myself afore I got spliced up. Mind you, I don't say that to Jane. It's different for a girl. She's *got* to keep 'erself straight; and I'd

a-given Jane a good walloping when I 'eard of it, 'if she 'adn't been in what you call an interesting condition."

The Rector rose with a frown on his face. "You have had provocation, Morton," he said. "But it doesn't give you the right to talk coarsely."

Morton turned to him with an indulgent smile. "Why, what 'ave I said different to what you said, Mr. French," he asked, "'cept that I says it like a common working man and you says it like a educated gentleman? Didn't you say as 'ow the woman 'ad to pay? Didn't you say as 'ow the man——"

"I didn't say that it was the natural thing for a young man to betray a girl," said the Rector. "That is what you said." He put his well-shaped hand on the boy's shoulder, where Morton's great fist had rested. "You have done wrong," he said, "and you have repented of the wrong. You were willing to mend it if you could; but it can't be mended. What you have to do is not to forget it—you can never do that; but to think of the trouble that an act of self-gratification has brought upon others, and be on your guard against temptations of the flesh, and all temptations for the future. God keep you straight and true."

He went out.

"Well, 'e's a gentleman," said Morton indulgently, "and don't pretend no more than what 'e carries out; though I ain't no more use for church religion myself than what I 'ave for chapel. Now then, Mr. Gosset, I think I done with you, so I'll say good-bye. You won't 'ear no more o 'this little affair for the present. But, as Mr. French said, you don't want to forget it; and o' course you *won't* want to—you being the religious man you are. There'll be the child to remind you. It'll come to your Sunday school, when it gets old enough to learn to walk in the way it should go—I *don't* think. But you'll see it playing about the streets of Roding. Good-morning, Mr. Gosset—and son."

CHAPTER IV

SIR RICHARD FRENCH

"RICHARD, this is perfectly delightful. We were beginning to think we should never see you again."

Lady Ruth came into her drawing-room, Joyce and Eddie, her inseparable companions, on either side of her. Her face was alight with pleasure. Sir Richard French was standing in front of the fire, and came forward to greet her. He was a tall spare man, with closely clipped hair nearly white; clean-shaven, except for a stubby grey moustache. His skin was burnt brown, and there was a fine network of wrinkles at the corners of his light blue eyes.

"My dear Ruth," he said, "you look younger than you did two years ago. But how the youngsters have grown!"

He kissed them both. "I shouldn't wonder if there was something for each of you when my boxes come to be unpacked," he said.

Richard French was a confirmed wanderer. He had been in a cavalry regiment in his youth, and served most of his time in India. After that he had shot big game in all quarters of the globe, but for some time had ceased to shoot anything at all, and had given himself up to pure travel, with no object except to see as much of the world as could be seen without losing entire touch with civilization. He was a rich man, and if the fancy took him to visit some place where white men were scarce, he would go to great expense in fitting out an expedition, which had no object except that of transporting himself, with possibly one

or two companions, if he should have happened to find congenial spirits willing to go with him.

He lived at Roding Court, a great Palladian pile of a house, surrounded by lovely gardens, about two miles from the town, and when he was at home led the ordinary life of a country gentleman, except that he took no part in field sports. He was a good landlord, and popular amongst his tenantry. He would go about amongst them, and show an interest in the smallest details of their lives; and he knew all their children by name. One would have thought—to see him sitting in the kitchen of a cottage, gossiping to the woman of the house, or paying one of his frequent visits to the village school, where he liked to hear lessons given—that his chief interests were those of a kindly father of his people, content to live out his life amongst them, absorbed in all their affairs, big and small.

But one fine morning he would be off, generally without a word of warning. Perhaps he had only gone to London for a few days; perhaps he had gone abroad for a few weeks, or a few months; perhaps he had started for the other side of the world, and might not be back again for a year or more.

Whatever the length of his absence, the house would not be shut up, nor any servants dismissed. For he might turn up again at any time; and he never gave warning of his coming. He would get out of the train at Roding, and hire a fly to drive him home; and when he got there he expected to find everything ready for him. If he had been away longer than a month or two, he generally called at Roding Rectory on his way; for he was fond of his brother, and his brother's family, although they never heard from him during his wanderings.

"Where have you come from this time, Richard?" asked Lady Ruth. "And how long are you going to stay with us?"

"Oh, my dear, how should I know?" he answered to the latter question. "Perhaps a month; perhaps a year. But certainly a month. How are you all? Where's Henry and Sylvia and the rest of them?"

He was sitting in an easy chair, with the children on either side of him, an arm round each.

"Henry is out somewhere," said Lady Ruth. "But he will be in to tea. You'll stay to tea, won't you?"

The fine wrinkles showed themselves in a smile. "I think I might stretch a point so far," he said. "Old Carbery can wait. His nose is redder than ever. He told me he hadn't seen me for a fortnight, and it's two years since I've been in Roding."

"Dear Richard, you shouldn't stay away from us for so long. You know you're wanted here. Your absences get longer and longer. Ah, here's Sylvia!"

Sir Richard held his pretty niece at arm's length, and looked well at her before he kissed her. "My dear, if it hadn't been for you I should have been in Siam at this moment," he said. "I meant to go on to Siam."

Sylvia laughed at this cryptic utterance. "Did you want to see me again so much, Uncle Dick?" she asked.

"I promised you a ball," he said. "I was thinking about you all, one night, sitting by my campfire. In Papua, it was. Eddie, you've been thought about in Papua, which can't be said of many little boys at home in England. Look it up in a map."

"You said you would give me a ball two years ago, Uncle Dick," said Sylvia.

"I know, my dear. I remembered it. It occurred to me that I was a most unnatural uncle. What was I doing in New Guinea—there, Eddie, I've let it out—while you were pining for a ball in England? So I came straight

home. Sylvia, you shall have a splendid ball. You shall have it as soon as we can make the arrangements."

"Can I come to it?" asked Joyce.

"And I?" asked Eddie.

Lady Ruth quelled their precocious desires, and Sir Richard said: "You can't come to Sylvia's ball. That's for grown-ups only. But you shall have one of your own—fancy dress, eh? And it shall last to ten o'clock, or perhaps even eleven. Where are Ralph and Ronald, Ruth?"

"Ronald has gone back to school. Ralph is in London. He has rooms in Gray's Inn. You know he is going to fight Notting Green next election? He is very busy with politics."

"I saw it in a paper. I was rather sorry he hadn't chosen a county division. Still, he'll get a good training; but he'll have a hard nut to crack with that majority against him. Ah, here's Henry! Well, Henry, my boy, here's the traveller returned, for a bit."

No cordiality was lacking in the greeting of the brothers. Sir Richard was a few years the older, but his spare wiry frame contrasted favourably with the somewhat portly presence of the Rector, who but for his active life would have been more than merely portly. It was good to see the two men together. They might have been instanced as fine examples of the result brought about by generations of gentle breeding, by any one who wished to advance the contention that gentle breeding produces handsome progeny. So, for that matter, might the Rector's family in bulk, most of whom were gathered together in this pleasant room, which showed all the signs of easy circumstances and cultivated taste. Warm and brightly lit, it seemed like a stronghold of opulence and comfort against the pressure of a cold world; and the people who occupied it seemed almost as if they had a right to immunity from the cares that beset less favoured mortals,

from the very fact that fortune had smiled upon them so generously at their birth.

But Fortune has been held fickle by all nations and in all times. She gives with one hand and takes away with the other, and is apt to visit the smallest mistake with the heaviest punishment; so that those who have seemed to be her chief favourites may find themselves completely forsaken by her, while those whom she has always frowned upon may earn her apparent good-will for no merits of their own.

As yet, however, this good-looking, pleasant-mannered, well-placed family had suffered nothing from her inconstancy, and if any of them had ever given her cause of offence, she seemed to have overlooked and forgiven it.

The Rector went to Roding Court with his brother to dine and sleep. They had a lot to talk over, though Sir Richard's late travels would hardly be mentioned between them. He spared his friends accounts of his experiences, and the world at large books or magazine articles. He did not even lecture about them at local institutes, or have lantern slides made of his numerous photographs. But his house was full of trophies gathered from all parts of the world, and he would answer questions about these if he were asked.

At the little round table, in the middle of the great square pillared dining-room, was served a dinner which showed no evidence of having been prepared at little more than an hour's notice. Except that the talk was of things that had happened over a space of two years, there was nothing to indicate that the two men were not meeting in the most ordinary way. Squire and parson, each had his point of view, and was sympathetic with that of the other. The Rector had been brought up in this great house, to the interests and pursuits of a member of a rich county family and only after leaving Cambridge had he turned his attention to the studies which would fit him for his profession. He knew a good deal

about the affairs of the estate to which he would some day succeed, if he outlived his brother, and Sir Richard's agent came to him sometimes for instructions, when his employer was away and there was something to be decided on outside the ordinary run of business. The shooting was kept up chiefly for his benefit, and that of his son; but of late years he had felt it rather a burden. He would not have been without it altogether, but the occupations of his office had absorbed him more and more, and he could not afford the time to overlook all the details of a big shoot or to arrange the parties to do it justice. In addition to the cares of his own large parish, he had the rural deanery of the district, and diocesan work besides. He was honorary Canon of Medchester Cathedral, and it was generally supposed that he would be offered the Archdeaconry when it became vacant. He was becoming a personage in clerical circles. Having taken orders simply because it was the tradition for a younger son of his family to do so, he had come to like his work and to put it first, which the numerous rectors of Roding who had borne the name of French had not always done.

Sir Richard is what is called a good churchman. When he was at Roding Court he drove in every Sunday morning to Roding Church, and went in the afternoon to the little church in a corner of his park, the living of which was also in his gift, and was held by his uncle, an old gentleman of well-nigh immemorial age, who had retired from the rectory of Roding twenty years before.

They drank their wine together in the library, which was the room chiefly used by Sir Richard. They sat in deep easy chairs in front of the fire, a table of old bright mahogany between them, on which was everything necessary for the delectation of two men of middle age who were well content to spend an evening talking to one another. Here was

another stronghold of warm affluence, doubly entrenched against the surprises of fate. For one at least of those who occupied it the fortifications seemed strong enough to resist all attacks. Sir Richard might lose his health, although that did not seem likely for some years to come. He could hardly lose anything else that enabled him to make what he would of his life. He had money in abundance, and was not open to attack at that point. He could not suffer disappointment over thwarted ambitions, for he had none. A bachelor, old enough to know what he wants to help him to pass the time—whose passing is yet his chief regret—and able to have what he wants, is largely immune from grief over the sorrows of others. He has not taken upon his shoulders those burdens which are freighted with joy as well as care; and because he is chiefly concerned with affairs which the griefs of others cannot touch, his life cannot be affected by them deeply, or for long, whatever fund of sympathy he may possess. It almost seems as if the high gods are powerless before a man who takes contentedly their lesser gifts, and asks for no great ones. They can only remove him from his enjoyment of them; and even there he is hardly assailable, for he knows that he must be removed some time or other, and adjusts himself accordingly.

The Rector was not so immune. He was not one by himself. Other lives reacted on his, and his on them. Sorrow could touch him at many points. But against the more capricious attacks of fortune he also seemed to be guarded by fortune herself. Well-off, well-liked, happy in his home life, interested in his work, an upright man, following the light as far as it shone upon him—one would have prophesied for him nothing but a life of honour and well-being, to be continued to the end of his useful days.

They were talking of the affairs of Roding parish. The Rector had told his brother of the coming of Dr. Merrow.

"I'll call on him when he comes," said Sir Richard. "I like to know everybody. Besides, it may stop his making mischief."

"Mischief—what mischief?"

"Well, he's a Radical, of course. They all are. He won't want to hide it, and I don't blame him. We don't hide that we're Unionists."

"We were Liberals once."

"We called ourselves so. Like a good many more, we were precious glad of the chance to go over. Still, we've not lost all our Whig enlightenment. We look after our people, and they're as well-off as ever they can expect to be. If this man comes down here and is dependent for his society on Gosset and all the rest of them, and we stand aloof, he'll take every opportunity of going for us. I shouldn't be inclined to blame him much for that, either. It's because nine out of ten Radicals have never met a country gentleman, and know nothing of what goes on except what they read, that they're so bitter against us."

"Oh, but Dr. Merrow is a gentleman. He's not the ordinary ranter. He was at Oxford, and all that sort of thing; a man of very good manners. I've met him, you know."

"Oxford means nothing, nowadays. Any clever boy can get there, whatever his parentage. He gets a polish, and you can't tell him from the real article. In fact, he may *be* the real article, as far as manners go, if his nature's all right to begin with. We haven't got the monopoly of manners. In fact, the manners of some of us are devilish bad."

"Merrow didn't strike me as the sort of man who would hold his tongue about things if a man in your position took him up."

"Took him up! Oh, my dear fellow, I don't mean any-

thing of that sort. I'm not a snob, and I've knocked about the world a bit and made friends with all sorts. I should be much more likely to lose my head if he were to take *me* up. He's a distinguished man in his own line, and I'm not. Still, I'm a man who gets on well with his tenantry, and I don't want to have them set against me. Men like Merrow do live in a class apart, however many people go to hear them preach, and however many letters they may write to the papers. They only know one side, and they don't know country life and conditions at all. Why, it's considered an extraordinary thing that this man, with his reputation, is coming to live in the country. They don't do it."

"He is doing it because he is broken down in health, and wants a rest. I should think he would keep quiet about politics, at any rate."

"I doubt it. He'll find himself invigorated by Roding air; he'll be cut off from the interests of his London life, and he'll want to be doing something. There'll be your schools, for one thing. Very likely he's a Passive Resister. You'll have all sorts of questions raised, Henry, my boy."

The Rector looked thoughtful for a moment, and then laughed. "Gosset told me the other day that we'd had things too much our own way in Roding," he said, "and it was going to be different now. All the same, from what I saw of Merrow, I believe that he's a man who thinks more of the religious side of his calling than the political. I read one of his published sermons the other day, and I wished I could ask him to preach in the church when he comes."

"Well, you ought to be able to, of course. You're a Protestant; so is he."

The Rector let this go by. A layman may still call the Church of England Protestant if he likes. The clergy have

learnt to eschew the word, unless they are content to be labelled of a particular school.

"By-the-by," said Sir Richard, "what's this about Gosset's son and a girl of the town? I had a talk with old William while I was dressing. He says Gosset wanted him to marry her, and you persuaded him not to."

The Rector looked up quickly with a frown. "Is that the story that is going about?" he asked. "Where did William hear that from?"

"I don't know. He's a rare old gossip, and picks up everything. His sister goes to Gosset's chapel, I believe. I expect he got it from her."

"I wonder if Gosset is putting that about. I can hardly believe it. He refused absolutely to hear of a marriage, and behaved in a way that I didn't like, though it's quite true that I was against it, too. It would be extraordinarily mean to put it on to me, and try to get it both ways himself. Of course, there are people who think it's wrong for the boy not to marry the girl. I've no doubt that amongst some of the frequenters of the chapel I'm held up as a pure worldling, and all that sort of thing. Still, I can't believe that Gosset would go back on himself in that way. Besides, Morton, the girl's father, was there. He knows what passed, and he expressed himself pretty strongly against Gosset. He hasn't been silent since, either. He calls himself an atheist, and is only too glad to get a handle of any sort against religion."

"Well, I dare say old William got it wrong. He generally does. Gosset won't like this happening, just as Dr. Merrow is coming."

"That side of it strikes him more than any other. I can't help feeling rather sorry for him about it, though, if it were to do with anything else, one might be rather amused. Morton is rubbing it in. He doesn't really think much of the disgrace, unfortunately, and I believe at heart he's not

sorry to have the weapon. He's a coarse, good-natured brute of a fellow, with a tongue in his head, and a certain amount of brains behind it. As long as he remains in Roding, Gosset won't hear the last of it."

"What about the boy? I didn't know Gosset had a grown-up son."

"He's not twenty-one yet. There's very little wrong with the boy. If he'd been brought up in healthy surroundings, this wouldn't have happened. He did want to marry the girl, not because he cares for her at all, but because he wanted to set the wrong right. Of course, it can't be set right in that way; I don't think the girl is straight. I should be inclined to blame her much more for what happened than him. But I respected him for the stand he made. He has the right stuff in him, if only he were allowed to live the ordinary life of a boy of his age. He ought to be playing cricket and football, and boxing, and all that sort of thing. It's extraordinary what George Barton has done with the rough boys of the town. He works off all their superfluous steam, and keeps them interested all the time. It's the rarest thing for us to have this sort of trouble in Roding. They're ashamed of hanging round with girls, and get chaffed about it if they do."

"George Barton's a good fellow. Why doesn't he get hold of this boy?"

"Oh, he's tried to, but Gosset won't have it. Now he's sent him packing off to London. Wants him out of the way, of course. He has sent him to a shop kept by a deeply religious friend of his own, as he told me, who will look after him strictly."

"Look after him, eh? A boy of twenty doesn't want to be kept strictly. He wants to learn to look after himself."

"Of course he does; and I told Gosset so. But what can you do with a man like that? If I say anything I'm

belittling religion. Religion is to keep him straight; nothing else can."

"Religion is a very good thing. I've a great opinion of religion. Still, you may have too much of it—at twenty."

The Rector was silent for a moment, and then laughed. "You've a rather disconcerting way of putting things, Dick," he said. "If you talk like that to Dr. Merrow he'll think you're a black heathen."

"Oh, I shan't talk like that to Dr. Merrow. I'm a man of tact. But I shan't hide my opinions either, and shan't expect him to hide his. We shall get on very well together."

CHAPTER V

MISS BUDD AND MRS. STENNING

MISS BUDD lived in an old-fashioned house in the High Street. Its front was right on the pavement, and she kept muslin blinds over the lower panes of the ground-floor windows, which prevented passers-by from looking in, but did not prevent her from looking out. The window of her bedroom on the first floor was built out into a bay. This was also curtained, but it was reported that Miss Budd spent many hours in the day there, looking up and down the street. At the back of the house was a long strip of garden surrounded by a high wall, upon which fruit ripened. It had a well-kept lawn, and gay flower-beds, and its pride was a giant mulberry, in the shade of which Miss Budd could enjoy seclusion whenever she coveted it. But this was not often, for she took great interest in the affairs of her fellow-townpeople, and preferred the front rooms of her house, where she could see something of them.

Miss Budd had money. Her house was well-furnished, and, although she took a pride in running it economically, she also took a pride in having everything very "nice." She kept two maids, but she never kept either of them for long, partly because she liked the occupation—which most housewives dread—of training new ones, and the reputation of being able to do so, partly because they wouldn't stay with her.

Her father had been a London doctor, her mother the daughter of a long-ago curate at Roding Church. She had no very near relations; but, occasionally, a subdued-looking

cousin, whom she called a niece, would stay with her for a few weeks. This cousin came of a family that had descended into trade, which was a thing Miss Budd abhorred.

Miss Budd had lived in Roding for over twenty years, and had long since reached the age described in the case of spinsters as "uncertain." If she had a fault, it was that of over-anxiety to keep her visiting-list socially select. This was a little difficult in Roding itself, because most of the houses such as she lived in herself, and the few new villas on the outskirts, were occupied by tradespeople of the town, active or retired; and, as had been said, she had a prejudice against retail trade. The people upon whom she could officially "call," without feeling that she was letting herself down, were the Rector's wife, the doctor's wife, and the wife of the headmaster of the grammar school. Others, such as the wife of the organist, and of the elementary schoolmaster, she sometimes went to see; but that was different. She never left cards if they were not at home.

Her chief circle was to be found in the surrounding rectories and vicarages, and the fly from the "French Arms" took her out to one or another of them fairly regularly once a week to within a radius of about eight miles. In course of time she had managed to add several country houses to her list. Since she had resided at Roding there had been a few changes of ownership or tenancy, and whenever that had happened Miss Budd had been one of the first to call, although it might never have occurred to the previous occupants to call upon her. One of these houses lay at a distance of nearly ten miles, which was a little hard on the fly-horse.

Miss Budd's chief interests were bound up in Roding Church, and all that went on there, and in the welfare of her immediate neighbours, whether they were such as could be called on or not. But this tracking down and capturing of what she called suitable acquaintance added zest to her life,

and she had not been without her triumphs. Her assiduous calls at parsonage houses had occasionally brought her into contact with the inhabitants of the larger houses allied to them, of which there were a good number round about Roding; these people were also to be met in Roding itself from time to time, in connection with societies, meetings, concerts, etc., and sometimes held gatherings at their own houses, at which the world at large was made welcome. So it had come to pass that Miss Budd had gradually become known, and there were few of the surrounding houses in which she had not at one time or another at least set foot. She was on the list of nearly all of the nearer ones for such entertainments as garden parties, after which she would of course "call"; and sometimes the lady who had invited her would call back, when she happened to be in Roding, and perhaps wanted a cup of tea. Then the affair was on a sound and regular basis, and the fly-horse dozed before the doors of yet another mansion.

What long drawn out pleasure these successive capitulations had afforded to Miss Budd cannot be measured by ordinary standards. There was no country house at which she had ever been asked to dine; there was none at which she could count on meeting a friend. In fact, there were some at which the advent of the fly-horse was considered unnecessarily frequent, and the opportunity given to Miss Budd to cause him to be directed there seemed to be regretted. She knew what it was to set out with trembling, and to return in humiliation. But no slights could detain her from "keeping up the connection." Put it that she was a collector, and had the collector's mania. A bibliophile does not value his books for the reading they afford him. He could buy a library for the price of one rarity, and the printed contents of that rarity, perhaps, for a few pence. So Miss Budd would rather have taken tea with a great lady, who made her excessively uncom-

fortable while she was drinking it, than have found herself warmly welcomed by one of her own standing. And yet she liked the warm welcome, and was a good friend to those who gave it to her.

The person for whom she really cared most in Roding was the doctor's wife. Mrs. Stenning was a thin, rather pathetically anxious lady, with a family of five young children, and a husband who spent more than his income justified on horseflesh. She found the prim opulence of Miss Budd's house a welcome refuge from her own untidy over-run home, all the rooms of which smelt of tobacco, and most of them of dog; for the doctor was nearly as fond of dogs as he was of horses, and had a taste for domesticating large ones.

The fact that Mrs. Stenning was *ex-officio* of the social circle to which Miss Budd aspired to belong, did not affect Miss Budd with jealousy, as it might have done, for the poor lady was rather worried than set up about it. She had no social ambitions, and would have been quite satisfied to make her friends amongst the people immediately around her, even amongst the shop-keepers, many of whom lived in considerable comfort and were hospitably inclined. It never occurred to her to pose as the equal of those of her husband's patients who belonged to the county, and she would very much have preferred that they should not ask her to dine with them, as they did occasionally, and set her worrying about a suitable dress, and what would become of the children while she was out. On the other hand, she took Miss Budd at her own valuation, and regarded her as amongst the few of her acquaintances in the higher circles of society whom it was not an anxiety to know.

Mrs. Stenning called upon Miss Budd one afternoon about a week after Sir Richard French's return. It was one of her mild eccentricities to do this at an hour when she should not

be considered to have come uninvited to tea, which gave her hostesses a good deal of trouble.

Miss Budd kept her waiting for some little time, and she sat before the bright-burning fire in Miss Budd's comfortable drawing-room, with the puckers of anxiety gradually smoothing themselves away from her thin plain face, as the unwonted quiet of her surroundings stole over her senses. The drawing-room was at the back of the house, and opened by French windows on to the garden. No sound from the traffic of the street reached it, and it formed an agreeable contrast to Mrs. Stenning's own drawing-room, which was in a similar position in a similar house but was backed by a stable-yard.

Miss Budd came in in her out-of-door dress, and Mrs. Stenning sprang up nervously to greet her.

"Oh, you are going out," she said. "I didn't know. I can easily come another time."

"You'll do no such thing," said Miss Budd. "I am very pleased to see you. I am going to call on Lady Ruth. I owe her a call. But I needn't go for another half-hour, and we shall just have time for a comfortable cup of tea."

"Oh, indeed, I couldn't think of it," expostulated Mrs. Stenning. "I assure you I didn't come here for that. Please don't on my account, Miss Budd."

But Miss Budd had already rung the bell. "Now sit down, there's a good soul," she said, "and tell me your news. I hope you have got rid of Charlie's ringworm."

"It is yielding to treatment," said Mrs. Stenning, relapsing into an easy chair, and glad enough to have been compelled to do so. "My husband says it is my fault for not having his hair cut short sooner; but he has such lovely hair. I couldn't bear to see it go. But it's quite true that I haven't always had the time to attend to it properly."

They pursued the subject of Charlie's hair in particular,

and Mrs. Stenning's family in general, for some time longer. Then Mrs. Stenning said: "Miss Budd, do you think I can wear my black to the ball at Roding Court? It's that I really came to ask you about. Can you wear black at a ball? It's the only one I've got, and if I can't I must have another one. But I do so hate spending the money, and nothing but black lasts. I didn't want to accept, but my husband says we must. I shan't enjoy it a bit; but if I can wear my black I shan't mind so much, as I shan't be put to any extra expense."

Miss Budd did not reply to the momentous question immediately. "When did the invitation to the ball come?" she asked.

"Oh, the day before yesterday, I think it was; or perhaps on Wednesday. I can't remember. Can women of my age go to balls in black? I don't know anything about these things. What are you going to wear?"

Miss Budd roused herself from the thoughtful mood into which the enquiry seemed to have plunged her. "I?" she said. "Oh, I don't know yet. I haven't thought about it. I am not sure that I shall go at all."

"Not go? Oh, then if you don't go, surely I needn't go. If only my husband would go alone! Perhaps he will, if I tell him that you are not going; and I could come and sit with you in the evening, if you like."

"I haven't made up my mind," said Miss Budd. "No, don't tell him that I am not going, please. I don't wish it. And of course you must go. Your black will do very well. If I decide to go I shall certainly wear black myself."

Mrs. Stenning was greatly relieved at this statement. "I suppose it is going to be a very grand ball, isn't it?" she asked. "Miss Budd, is it with the idea of getting Lord Pangbourne to propose to Sylvia? That does seem to be

hanging on, doesn't it? Has Lady Ruth said anything to you about it lately? Do tell me."

One reason why Miss Budd liked Mrs. Stenning so much was that she took a deep interest in the family affairs of her more important neighbours, but never discussed them as if they were those of her equals. She thought this showed a very proper spirit on Mrs. Stenning's part, and was pleased to reward it by giving her little tit-bits of information from time to time, as from one who was in a position to do so.

"We haven't talked about it much lately," she said. "And of course anything I tell *you* is in the strictest confidence. I shouldn't repeat intimate conversations to anybody else. From what Lady Ruth *has* said to me, I know she would not like the idea so much as mentioned."

"Oh, but, Miss Budd, I shouldn't *dream* of repeating a *word* you say to me to any one else, not even to my husband. I am sure you ought to know that. It is as safe with me as if it was in the grave. But, of course, I *do* like to know what is going on, and you being so much in the thick of things, I do like to come and talk things over, comfortably, and hear secrets about all the grandees."

Miss Budd did not quite like this speech. It made her look as if she were one of those people who loved nosing out the affairs of her neighbours, and, as she often said, if there was one thing she hated more than another it was gossip. But the attitude otherwise was unexceptionable. Mrs. Stenning quite took her for one of the grandees herself, and quite thought that every one of them had told her all their secrets.

"Well, one is naturally interested in the affairs of one's friends," she said, "and of course I have known Sylvia since she was a baby."

"Oh, yes; and she is a sweet girl, isn't she? So pretty—and ladylike! I should like to see her marry a lord."

"Well, as to that," said Miss Budd; "it would be quite a

natural thing; although with the chances Sylvia has had some people might think it rather odd that she is not married already."

"Oh, but she is not twenty-one yet. I wasn't married till I was twenty-five, and I was considered young even then."

Mrs. Stenning seldom offended in this way. When she did she was brought to book immediately.

"Well, that is rather different, isn't it?" said Miss Budd, drily, and Mrs. Stenning hastened to admit that it was.

"Oh, of course, I was not nearly so pretty as Sylvia," she said, "and didn't move in the same circles—naturally. I suppose young ladies who are presented at Court and go up to London for the season, do marry younger than we do, don't they? When I say *we*, of course I don't mean you."

Miss Budd accepted the tribute. "In my time in London," she said, "girls certainly married young if they married at all. Of course some of them preferred to keep their independence even then."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Stenning; meaning that she quite understood that Miss Budd could have married a dozen times over, if she had not preferred to keep her independence.

"Sylvia has now had two seasons in London," Miss Budd went on, "and in my time a girl who was not married at the end of two seasons was considered rather *passée*. It may be different now. I don't know. I prefer to live quietly here in the country, and when I go to London, to go at a time when there is not so much crowd and bustle."

"Well, I rather like London in the season myself," said Mrs. Stenning. "It is so gay. Still, of course, it is different for me. I am only a looker-on."

So was Miss Budd, although she did not say so, and left it to be inferred that half the houses in London would have been open to her if she had liked to go up "for the season."

The season had meant nothing to her in the days to which she constantly referred, for her father had practised in Clapham; but she had read a good many novels.

"The fact is," said Miss Budd, "that Sylvia hasn't got the *style* that is expected of girls now-a-days—always has been, for that matter, in good society. Still, men who are no longer quite young are sometimes attracted by that sort of simplicity, and I have never denied that Sylvia *is* pretty in her own way."

"Oh, I think she is perfectly lovely," said Mrs. Stenning. "And always so beautifully dressed, although of course plainly."

"Ye-es," said Miss Budd. "Lady Ruth certainly has a good taste in dress, and I must say dresses *suitably*; and Sylvia too. That simplicity—or plainness, as you call it—is the proper thing for the country, and costs a good deal of money too. If dress were everything, Sylvia would certainly possess style."

"Then you don't think she is stylish?"

"Well, I wouldn't say so to anybody but you; because of course I don't like criticising such old and dear friends as the Frenches."

"Oh, no," put in Mrs. Stenning.

"But, as I say, there *is* a lack of style. You would hardly expect, for instance, even in a country town like this, that a girl of Sylvia's birth would go about unattended, and without gloves, as she does."

"Oh, isn't that done?" asked Mrs. Stenning.

"And she has very little discrimination," Miss Budd went on. "Of all the girls that she might make friends with in the houses round about here, she chooses Myra Curtis—a nice enough girl, I don't deny, though abrupt in her manners. But Farncombe is the poorest living hereabouts, and Mr. Curtis has nothing but what he gets from it. Nor Mrs.

Curtis either, and neither of them are anything at all by birth. Mr. Curtis was not even at Oxford or Cambridge, and I believe he worked as a clerk before he took Holy Orders. I am not saying that that is anything against him. But there is Myra obliged to work for her living, and if she were not fortunate enough to be engaged at Farncombe Hall, she would certainly have to go out as a governess. She *is* a governess, however kindly the Prendergasts may treat her, and—and—well, there it is. She is Sylvia's chief friend."

"Well, of course, you know best," said Mrs. Stenning. "I dare say it isn't very suitable; but I rather like it in Sylvia all the same."

"Yes, there is that side," said Miss Budd. "And don't imagine for a moment that I am reflecting on Sylvia's *character*. I have known her from babyhood, and although there are things I could wish altered, she is, on the whole, a *nice girl*. I am only saying that with the advantages she has had—treated almost like a daughter by Lady Hampshire, and taken about everywhere—she has not turned out *quite* as one would expect."

Mrs. Stenning considered this for a moment. "Well, you know best," she said again. "But, as far as I am concerned, I am rather glad she hasn't altered. She is always ready to help with the children, and is as sweet as possible with them. I never feel that she is any different to what I am when she comes into my house; and she never talks big about her grand relations. She is just like any other nice clergyman's daughter."

"Ah, there you have it," said Miss Budd, oracularly. "If she was *only* a clergyman's daughter she would be just what she ought to be."

"I must say I should like to see her married, though," pursued Mrs. Stenning. "For her own sake, I mean, for

I should be sorry enough to lose her myself. Do you think she will marry Lord Pangbourne? Of course I have never so much as mentioned his name to her after what you told me, and wouldn't, though I do feel sometimes that I should like her to say something about him to me."

"Oh, she wouldn't do that," said Miss Budd hastily, "and for goodness' sake, don't ask her any fishing questions. As I told you, he seemed much attracted last season in London, and she met him at one or two house-parties in the autumn and winter. But his married life with his first wife was very unhappy, and I dare say he finds it difficult to make up his mind to make a second attempt."

"He divorced his first wife, didn't he?"

"Yes. But there was nothing whatever against *him*. And she died afterwards. Otherwise, of course, there could be no question of a second marriage. I mean, not with people in the position of the Frenches—a clergyman's family."

"It doesn't sound quite what one would like for Sylvia."

"I don't know. He is a distinguished man, and, after all, not *old*—only thirty-six."

"What is he like to look at? Is he handsome?"

"I've never seen him, you know. At least, not to my knowledge. He would have been a boy when I lived in London. But there was a portrait of him in some paper that I saw, when he was given his appointment. A grave-looking man, but distinguished-looking. Oh, yes, I think you might call him handsome. It would be a suitable match for Sylvia."

"Did you say that he had been asked to the ball at Roding Court? I forgot."

A shadow came over Miss Budd's face. "I don't know," she said shortly.

"If he has we shall see him there, and I think we might draw inferences, don't you?"

"Perhaps so," said Miss Budd. "Did you say it was Wednesday or Thursday you received your invitation?"

"Well, I really forget. But it would have come the same day as yours. When did yours come?"

Miss Budd did not reply to the question, being unwilling to acknowledge that she had not received an invitation.

"Good gracious me, it's past half-past four," she said, looking at the wall-bracket clock by the door. "I really must be going. Walk with me as far as the Rectory, will you? We haven't had a word yet about this dreadful affair of Gosset's son. It is one of the things I want to see Lady Ruth about."

CHAPTER VI

IN LADY RUTH'S DRAWING-ROOM

"THE tiresome old creature!" said Lady Ruth, when Miss Budd's name was brought up to her.

She was with Sylvia in the pleasant upstairs room looking on to the garden, which they mostly used during the day. They were both writing letters. "Do you think I could say not at home?" she asked. But Sylvia vetoed the idea. "I'll come and help you out, mother, when I've finished this letter," she said.

So Lady Ruth went down, and nobody could have guessed from the charming smile with which she greeted her visitor that she disliked her instinctively and intensely. It was one of the penalties of her position as rector's wife that she had to be "nice to all sorts." But being nice came so easily to her that it was doubtful if Miss Budd would have guessed how cordially she was disliked, if Lady Ruth had received her in any other capacity.

"Sylvia will be down in a minute or two," she said. "We have been frightfully busy with all the arrangements for the ball. She and I have written *all* the regular invitations, and now we are collecting our own party. We are all looking forward to it immensely. There hasn't been a ball at the Court for I don't know how long. It has been a bachelor's house for so many years that all sorts of things want seeing to, and we are continually going to and fro."

Miss Budd's mouth wore rather a pinched expression during this speech. "If I can give you any help," she said, "you know how pleased I shall be to do so."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Lady Ruth, a little hastily. "But we are getting on very well. It is only to see after things. There are plenty of people to do them."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Miss Budd. "It is to be Sylvia's ball, is it not? I suppose you and she are asking the guests."

Lady Ruth thought this rather impertinent. Miss Budd was apt to be rather impertinent. "They will be my brother-in-law's guests," she said. "We have written all the invitations."

"It must have been a long business. Have you finished sending them out?"

"Yes, and we are beginning to get the answers. Nearly everybody about here is coming. We shall be a great gathering of neighbours."

"Mrs. Stenning has just been with me. She is delighted at having received an invitation; and of course it is a great *honour* for her."

"An honour! Oh, no. *Of course* she received an invitation."

Sylvia came in at this moment, and saw that her mother was already ruffled by her visitor, although Miss Budd had not noticed it, and was casting about for the best way of intimating plainly that if Mrs. Stenning had been invited to the ball, *she* ought to have been, although it had so happened that in all the years of her residence at Roding, she had never actually spoken to Sir Richard French, and Roding Court was one of the few big houses in the neighbourhood that she had not entered.

They talked about anything but the ball during tea-time, for Lady Ruth was determined to give Miss Budd no further opportunities for making such speeches as she had made about Mrs. Stenning. Misunderstanding its ironical intention, she had thought it simply ill-natured and snobbish.

Miss Budd made various attempts to introduce the subject, and each of her speeches was a little more vinegary than the last. Eventually she dropped it, quite convinced that there had been no mistake, as she had supposed, and hoped, might have been the case, but that it had not been intended to invite her, and she was now as good as being told so.

After tea, she intimated to Lady Ruth that she wished to have a word in private with her, and Sylvia retired.

"I wanted to speak to you about this dreadful affair of young Gosset and Jane Morton," she said. "I feel partly responsible towards the parents, as it was I who discovered the girl's condition."

"I think they feel," said Lady Ruth coldly, "that you had some responsibility towards her."

Miss Budd frowned. "I didn't mean that," she said. "How could any blame conceivably attach to me? I looked after the girl carefully, as I always do with my maids, and if she hadn't been so clever in deceiving me, I should have found out what was going on long before. But, of course, it was not she who was chiefly to blame. She is flighty, as many young girls are but if it had not been for that young hypocrite, who is as deep and cunning as they make them, she would never have gone wrong in that dreadful way."

"I would very much rather not talk about it at all, Miss Budd," said Lady Ruth. "I have seen Jane Morton constantly, and my husband has seen Mr. Gosset's son. Neither of us think that he is to blame more than she is; but now the trouble has come it is of no use to go back to that."

"Well, I don't agree with you," said Miss Budd. "And at any rate, whichever of them is most to blame, the girl is being left to bear all the punishment."

Lady Ruth was silent. She shrank with all her soul

from discussing the question at all with this woman, who had turned the girl out of her house the moment she had discovered her fault, and who tore aside with a rough hand the coverings which her own delicacy prompted her to keep over an event that had caused deep trouble and filled her with vicarious shame.

"I think very strongly," said Miss Budd, "that young Gosset *ought* to be made to marry her. It might be the saving of her, and if she is left to the disgrace of bearing and bringing up an illegitimate child she is bound to become hardened, and may go to the bad altogether."

"Oh, but you don't know what you are saying," cried Lady Ruth. "I have been with her constantly. She is very sorry for what has happened. She will be a better girl. Why do you want to interfere now? Why must you come and talk to me about it at all?"

Interfere! That was a disagreeable word for Miss Budd to hear. Her face hardened. "I hope it is not interference," she said, "to wish to do what one can for a girl who has been deceived in that way."

"But you had your chance of doing something for her, and you threw it away. You were the first to find out that she was in trouble, and you drove her out of your house. You didn't care then what became of her."

"I sent her to her parents. Do you really wish to blame me for doing that, Lady Ruth?"

Miss Budd was outraged. She had never seen Lady Ruth in this state before. She had seemed to be content to leave parish matters, where a woman's hand was wanted, to Miss Budd, who had in consequence taken upon herself many responsibilities usually sustained in a parish by the wife of the parish priest. There must be something behind all this; and no doubt it was connected in some way with the omission to invite Miss Budd to the ball.

She had no time more than to glance at the possibilities opening up, for Lady Ruth took her up at once.

"You told her to go home to her parents," she said. "You didn't go with her, or even see that she went. You left her to tell them of her own disgrace; you were not kind or tender to her at all. Do you know that she very nearly didn't go home? She thought of going to London to hide herself. Yes, I do blame you. If she had done that, and been lost, it would have been because of you, and your cruelty to her."

But this was beyond everything! Lady Ruth was leaning forward in her low chair, her eyes fixed upon Miss Budd's face, her cheeks flushed, her mouth quivering. Miss Budd had once confided in Mrs. Stenning that, for a clergyman's wife, Lady Ruth was a little too much of a butterfly. She did not look like a butterfly now. Miss Budd forgot all about her rank, which was seldom out of her mind when in Lady Ruth's company, and led her to behave in a more honeyed manner than if there had been none. She rose from her seat. "I really can't stay here and be talked to in that fashion," she said. "I don't think you know what you are saying, or doing. I suppose you are so much taken up with your preparations for the ball that you have no time to think of what is fitting in the wife of a priest."

Lady Ruth rose too. Her excitement was gone. She was the aristocratic lady faced by a common and presuming woman. Her hand was on the bell, and a hint of doubt was beginning to appear in Miss Budd's eyes. If she should go like this, she would probably not enter Lady Ruth's drawing-room again.

But the door opened, and the Rector came in.

"Ah, Miss Budd," he said, shaking hands with her. "Have you come to talk about this ball that is engaging all our attentions?"

Then he saw that something had happened, and looked enquiringly at his wife, who said nothing, but stood by the mantelpiece waiting.

Miss Budd recovered herself. "Under the circumstances, Mr. French," she said, "I am not very much interested in the ball. I came to say something about Jane Morton, and am sorry that Lady Ruth should think that I myself am in any way to blame in the matter. Perhaps I ought to have seen that the girl went home; but I was so upset by what had happened that it did not occur to me. At any rate, I want to do whatever lies in my power now to help, and I should like to talk it over quietly."

"I think it is too late now for Miss Budd to do anything, Henry," said Lady Ruth. "There is nothing to be done, except to be kind to the poor girl. But I have said all I have to say, and I will leave Miss Budd to talk it over with you, if she still wishes to do so."

She went out of the room, and Miss Budd's heart sank, for she did not take leave of her in any way, and held her head high.

The Rector's face was troubled. He didn't sit down, or ask Miss Budd to do so, but said: "I think there is nothing more that can be done. It has been a painful affair, and my wife has felt it deeply. I am glad that she has been able to make friends with the Mortons; and they are glad to see her when she goes to them."

"Oh, of course they would be glad to see Lady Ruth," said Miss Budd. "And I am sure it is very good and sweet of her to interest herself in the case. I would go myself, and in fact did so, a few days ago, but—well, Mrs. Morton was really so abominably rude, that I had to come away."

"Well, there it is, you see," said the Rector. "There

is nothing you can do, Miss Budd. You had better try and forget all about it."

He waited for her to go, and she knew he was waiting. It required some courage on her part to say, with nervous brevity: "I think he ought to marry her."

"Others think so too," said the Rector, as shortly.

"Don't *you* think so, Mr. French?" she asked, looking up into his face.

"No," he said. "And in any case it is of no use talking about it. Morton wouldn't have it, if there were no other reason against it."

She digested this. "I heard something of the sort," she said. "But he is a low type of man—never comes to church, and makes an open scoff of religion. In my opinion he ought not to be allowed to dictate in such a serious matter as this. The girl ought to be rescued from her surroundings. The young man ought to pay the penalty of his wickedness."

"Well," he said, keeping his patience, not without an effort, "the subject has been very thoroughly gone into. I went into it myself, and I formed my own opinion, on which I acted, as far as it lay with me to act at all. You must forgive me for saying that I don't want to open it up again."

"Oh, of course, Mr. French, I shouldn't think of interfering in a matter that rested entirely with you. But in a case like this—the woman's hand, you know. Isn't it a case where a woman may help?"

"Yes. It is very much so. My wife is helping. She is doing what I never could have done, what no man can do. The girl clings to her; she is very much softened. She has found a woman who is tender to her in her trouble. She will not feel herself an outcast."

Miss Budd thought herself plainly indicated in this speech

as the wrong sort of woman to help, and took offence at it.

"A good many people would think," she said stiffly, "that a girl who had sinned in that way *ought* to consider herself an outcast until the man——"

"I know they would," interrupted the Rector. "There are always people who love to throw stones."

This offended Miss Budd still more. "I should hardly have thought *you* would have condoned such an offence," she said, "unless it had been followed by marriage, which——"

"I don't condone it," he said. "But I must say again, Miss Budd, that there is nothing you can do to help matters now, and I would very much rather not discuss it further."

He made a movement as if he expected her to take her leave, but she had not done yet, and although feeling herself dismissed, and resenting it, she still kept her place. "Then I needn't say any more about that side of it," she said; "but it makes it very difficult for me going about amongst the people, if it is to be considered the church view that marriage should not follow a sin of this sort. Of course, in the case of the Dissenters, no religious rule would be binding. They would always act just as it suited them at the moment, as Gosset has done. I am glad to say that practically everybody I have met despises *him* for the way he has behaved. He has shown himself the hypocrite he is, and his claws will be very much cut in the future."

"Oh, Miss Budd," said the Rector, with some show of impatience, "let us leave Gosset alone. I don't want his claws cut, for any good he succeeds in doing; we shan't be doing any better work in our line by setting ourselves against him in his. He counts for little; we need scarcely ever come into contact with him."

"Well, that is just it. With this popular preacher they have managed to attract here—goodness knows how—they will interfere with us a good deal more than they have done. And as for coming in contact with him, I think you ought to know, Mr. French, and I came here partly to tell you, that people *are* coupling your name with his, and in a way that is doing harm to the Church. They don't understand why you should take his side, and I am told that the Dissenters are even saying—although of course I don't believe it for a moment, knowing the sort of man *he* is—that he was willing that the marriage should take place, and that you overpersuaded him against it."

"Well, let them say it. If they say it to me I shall know what to reply."

"It is our own people I am thinking of. I am afraid you think that I am only interfering, Mr. French, as Lady Ruth told me to my face. If I consulted my own inclinations I should have gone away and not said anything more. But it isn't so. I do feel so strongly that this marriage ought to take place. It would be the right thing; it would close mouths; it would——"

"It would cause Gosset, living in Roding, to lose caste. Aren't you thinking a good deal of that, Miss Budd?"

The words were like the stroke of a lash to her. They came sharply. The remembrance of the way his wife had stood when he came into the room, and of her leaving it, and certain things that Miss Budd had since let drop about her conversation with her, had been working on him. He condemned Miss Budd's action in turning the girl out of her house, without caring what became of her, as much as Lady Ruth did, and saw what lay at the root of her desire to meddle in the affair now, still more plainly. There was nothing good in it. It was made up chiefly of spite. Her religion largely consisted in opposition to other forms of

religion, and to those who practised them; and if she could put a spoke in the wheel of Gosset, or of any Dissenter, it would be a great satisfaction to her.

Miss Budd drew back. "I don't understand you, Mr. French," she said, speaking with deeply offended dignity. "I came here to tell you of something you ought to know, and you positively insult me; and Lady Ruth too. If I am to be considered, after all these years, not a suitable person to know, I think it might have been indicated to me in a less objectionable fashion. It is not my habit to push myself in where I am not wanted, and I can take a hint as well as anybody."

The Rector missed the allusion to the lacking invitation, but his disgust with Miss Budd was not lessened by this speech, which he thought merely feline. And the references to Lady Ruth angered him still further. "In this case," he said coldly, "I can't regret having given the hint," and led Miss Budd to the street door without further words.

She went home fuming, and, under cover of the darkness, worked her face into all manner of angry contortions. But through all her offence, and her reiterated self-assurances that nothing would ever induce her to set foot in that house again as long as she lived, there ran a disagreeable sense that she had cut sure ground from beneath her feet. When she reached her house, and saw some letters that had come by the evening post lying on the hall table, she looked through them to see if they might include the belated invitation. If it had been there she would have written an acceptance—possibly waiting until the next morning to do so.

Lady Ruth had gone upstairs to Sylvia, after leaving Miss Budd and the Rector in the drawing-room. She had gone slowly, so as to be able to join her daughter with no signs of anything out of the way having happened to her.

She and Sylvia were almost like sisters in the way that they talked over with one another anything that happened, and it had added to her distress over the affair of Jane Morton that no hint of it must be allowed to reach her daughter's ears.

"Have you got rid of her, mother?" Sylvia asked.
"What did she want to see you about?"

"Father came in, and I have left her to him," said Lady Ruth. "By-the-by, Sylvia, I don't remember having received her answer to the invitation."

"She hasn't sent one," said Sylvia. "I have just been going over the list. Let us hope she doesn't mean to come."

"You are sure an invitation was sent to her?"

"Oh, yes. It was amongst that lot that I dropped on the stairs when I took them down to be posted. But I picked them all up again."

But Miss Budd's invitation had not been picked up, and was at that moment lying behind a heavy oak stand in the hall, and not likely to be disturbed until the next spring-cleaning.

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE BARTON

GEORGE BARTON got out of his cab at the gate of Gray's Inn, and leaving his bag to be brought up by the porter, walked across the Square to Ralph French's rooms.

The old red-roofed buildings of the Inn, and the large gravelled squares, were rather like the courts of a college; and the sun of a fine afternoon in early March was shining on them. His spirits rose. He and Ralph French had shared rooms together in the Great Court of Trinity; it would be like old times to be together again for a couple of nights. And a taste of London is always something of a mild excitement to a young man who has settled himself to work in the country.

Ralph was out; but there was a note from him to say that he would be back in half an hour. George was to get tea ready, and there were drinks in the cupboard, if he wanted one.

It was extraordinarily like being back at Cambridge. Ralph had only lately taken these rooms, and George had not been in them before. They were furnished with Ralph's share of the things that they had used together, supplemented by later purchases which showed some change in the habits of their owner from those of the undergraduate. There was a large writing-table in one of the windows, covered with papers and blue books. Two wicker easy chairs had been banished to corners of the room, and their places were taken on each side of the fireplace by new upholstered ones, on one of which there was an elaborate book-rest. There

was a large book-case, well-filled; and books and reviews were lying on the gate-legged table at which they had had so many breakfasts and lunches and dinners together, and with their friends, in those light-hearted days. Its place as a dining-table was taken by a new one of a more convenient type.

But the pictures on the panelled walls, and the few decorative articles in the room were the same. Scarcely anything had been added to them. This was not the room of a young man delighting to surround himself with objects of beauty. The conveniences were new, the decorations were such as happened to exist. It was the room of a worker, who liked to make himself fairly comfortable.

George Barton noted it all—the familiar things first. How they brought back the old days to his memory! He looked at all the framed photographic groups, most of which were different from those that he had himself; for he had played cricket and football, and Ralph had rowed. Two oars, with blades emblazoned, hung over the book-case; there were silver cups, and other prizes on the mantelpiece and elsewhere. There were reminiscences of Harrow besides, where they had been together, at the same house, before going up in the same year to Cambridge. The tea-set on the table included a sugar-basin and milk-jug with the Trinity arms stamped on them. It was surprising that they should have survived the destruction that had long since overtaken the cups, and the rest of the set. They took George's mind back in a rush to the October evening on which he and Ralph had gone over to the shop opposite to the Great Gate to buy them. They had been fortunate enough to get rooms in college in their first term, and the fixing of them up, and the purchase of necessaries, had been a pleasurable affair. Such articles of crockery as these, decorated with University or college arms, make a special

appeal to the freshman. His state of mind when he had bought them returned to him for a moment, and he felt retrospectively the eager pleasure in a new life just opening, the blue gown on his shoulders, the sensation of the wet pavements and the light reflected on them, the damp autumn air, and the stately buildings of the great college, their windows alight, which contained the rooms, not so unlike these, in which he was to taste the sweets of a liberty that seemed complete to a boy who had just left school. He felt a touch of nostalgia. That opening thrill, over life in a place so storied and picturesque, fades after a time, only to be recaptured by wafts of memory in after years. It was only six years since he and Ralph had been freshmen together, but the time seemed very far away, and the age that he had now reached almost patriarchal. Certainly, it was not in him again to feel the same degree of pleasure in buying tea-cups.

He put the kettle standing in the fender on the fire, and sat down in one of the big easy chairs in front of it.

It was the first time that this realization of the passage of years had come to him. A man of twenty-five, of the training that George Barton had had, is still a very young man. Physically, he has not even reached maturity, and he is hardly within sight of the time when his aptitude for any form of athletic exercise, or his taste for it, will begin to lessen. His eye is towards the future, which still stretches illimitably in front of him, and holds possibilities which experience has not yet taught him to discount. Only a little of the glamour of life has been rubbed off, and much still remains. He knows so little of it, although he thinks he knows so much. Intellectually he is hardly past his boyhood. He may already have laid up a rich store of knowledge, but he is only beginning to learn to use it. He is at the beginning of most things that count in life, but not at the

first beginning. The miles from nineteen to twenty-five are long ones, and it is seldom before the end of them is reached that the traveller has any clear idea as to where they are likely to lead him.

George looked round the room again, as if to gauge from its contents how far his friend had moved on during the three years they had been parted. Ralph French had not done a great deal of work at Cambridge. During his first year he had had visions of a First-Class in the Classical Tripos, but he had also had visions of a rowing blue, and he was not of the stuff of which first classes are made without desperate and undivided endeavour. The incentive was not strong enough. His place in the world was already made for him. A First-Class would hardly help him in any path he wished to tread, and he was not a scholar by temperament. In his second year he changed his mind and began to read History. At the beginning of his third year he knew that he had no chance of rowing in the University crew, and gave up rowing to hunt. This led to some change of companionship, and the men he mostly lived with until he went down were not amongst the workers, and many of them did no work at all. He took a Third-Class in his Tripos, but neither expressed nor felt much regret at not being placed higher. He had had a very good time, and he had read his books, which was what he had chiefly wanted.

Steady, sober George, working in regular hours, but by no means overworking, for his modest pass degree, and amusing himself in his quiet fashion, had felt rather disappointed with the comparative failure of his cleverer friend. But now, as he looked round Ralph's room, and noted the signs of his present occupations, he felt that it had not been so much of a failure after all. Ralph had not unfitted himself for the work that it became him to do by the way he had amused himself during his last year at Cambridge, although

he might not have advanced himself. He was not one of the wasters. He had travelled for nearly a year after taking his degree, and had since then spent a good deal of time over the ordinary pursuits of country life. There was no reason, in the nature of things, as George understood them, why he should have done any work at all, with the prospects that were his. But he seemed to be working now, and his friend was glad of it.

One moved on. One's interests in life altered. Work became a real thing, not merely a means towards something to be attained, and of no particular interest in itself. In the light of that sudden realization of how his own outlook had changed, and of the signs of Ralph's solidification of purpose, he took a look into himself and the ends to which he was shaping.

He was an only son. His mother had died before he was old enough to know her; his father, who was also dead, had been a sailor. He had lived a good deal with relations during his boyhood, and chiefly with the Frenches. It was because he wanted to go to Harrow with Ralph that he had not been put into the Navy. He was to have gone to Sandhurst from Harrow, but wanted to go to Cambridge, and liked the life when he got there. To do anything in the Army he must have left without taking a degree. His career was discussed in a leisurely fashion. His father did not much mind what he did. George would have enough to live on without doing anything, but he thought he ought to have some profession to occupy him, at least during his own lifetime. It was a question between the Bar and the Church. George rather inclined to the Bar, because he could share rooms with Ralph in London. But on the other hand he did not suppose he was clever enough to do much at it, and if it were not for sharing rooms with Ralph, he much preferred living in the country.

The scale was turned by his father's death, during his second year at Cambridge. He felt it deeply, although they had not been much together. He became intimate with one of the Deans of his college at this time, who had known his father, and who treated him with great sympathy. His friend did not press him to take Orders, but insensibly influenced him in that direction, and when he left Cambridge he went to read theology with a man of deep but unobtrusive piety, who had trained many generations of graduates in the same way, and impressed something of his own fine personality upon not a few of them.

At the end of his year's preparation he had not been ordained with the others who had shared it with him. He had some doubts of his own fitness. In the way that the Church had been set before him, as a profession, alternative to any other, he had not looked forward to taking it as more than an occupation, to be treated seriously while he was in it, certainly, but to be laid aside at any time that he might prefer not to be tied to regular work. He was well-off. He had had ideas of buying, by and by, a little country place and settling down in it—possibly with a wife, as most men of middle-age seemed to have got themselves married at some time or another. He would still be a clergyman, of course, and men in that position could make themselves useful; he would only not be tied to a parish.

His views had not sensibly changed. There seemed nothing wrong in such a prospect, and he had no definite plans about it; it would be years, probably, before he would retire from active work, and in the meantime he would work as others worked, first in a curacy, and possibly some years as an incumbent, if a suitable living offered itself. He might even be quite content to go on all his life as a parish priest; it would depend upon the sort of place in which he should find himself. There were many country rectories and

vicarages that would offer him just what would suit him, if he were looking out for a house of his own. He might not want to give up at all; his plans were nothing like so definite as to include retirement within a certain time.

And yet he had come to feel uneasy at taking his calling in that way. None of the little group of men who had read with him were doing so. There were ten of them; and seven were going to curacies in poor parts of London, or to big towns where their work would be hard and absorbing.

One of these was a man called Stuckley, who had been with him at Cambridge, and had lived an idle, extravagant life there. He had been intended for the Church because there was a good family living waiting for him, as the younger son of a rich landowner. He had expected to do no more than the exacting duties of his calling for a handful of parishioners, and to receive an income of over a thousand a year for it, with a good house and a considerable acreage of glebe. He would live much as his elder brother would live in the big house hard by, when he should succeed to the estate, would hunt and shoot, and enjoy all the diversions of a country gentleman, with a conscience all the clearer for having a slightly more serious basis to his life. The present incumbent of this attractive living was a very old man, ready to retire when the young one should be ready to succeed him. He would spend a year in a country curacy, and at twenty-four, when he had taken Priest's Orders, would be instituted into a position from which only very gross misconduct on his part could remove him for the rest of his life.

But he had changed his plans during that year of preparation, during which his idleness and extravagance had gradually reduced themselves. The rich living could wait for a bit. He was going to a curacy in one of the worst slums

of London, where there was a big church and a large staff of clergy, all over-worked. And he did not propose to leave it in a year, or perhaps in many.

George's friends had all made their own plans. No pressure was ever brought to bear upon them by the wise old man under whose guidance they spent their year of preparation. They were left free to go where they would; but there had been not a few changes of plan of this sort amongst the men who had been coming to him for so many years to prepare for their calling. They were all over the world, these men, some of them in positions of authority in the Church. They were of all shades of belief permitted, or perhaps even hardly permitted, in the Anglican Church. He stamped a spirit on them, not a creed, and even the most unlikely subjects did not escape some impression of it.

George Barton's slow moving mind had come to regard the ideas with which he had left Cambridge as at least doubtful. He could not be quite at his ease in taking upon himself vows so solemn with a purpose so light. The ministry of the Church loomed big to him—big and mysterious. No man could enter it and be just as he was before, unless he had so little of good in him that he was unfitted to enter it at all. And as to fitness, he knew well enough that no man was fit to take upon himself such responsibilities for the souls of others. With humility and yet with courage he might go forward, if he was ready to submit himself to the leading that should come to him; he must not adventure himself upon those waters unless trusting to a stronger hand than his own to uphold him. His faith, which was of a fixed unquestioning nature as far as it had led him, failed him here. He was not prepared to take the irrevocable step, felt no assurance that it was demanded of him, since he had walked towards it with small idea of what it might lead to.

He went into the world, travelled a little, paid visits, occupied himself much as he had looked forward to doing for the greater part of his life, and at first enjoyed his freedom. For a month or two he lived in London and went down twice a week to the slum in which Stuckley was working, to help him with his boys' clubs. This prospective incumbent of one of the richest livings, allied to one of the smallest parishes, in England was as happy as possible, with his days filled by such a succession of duties as left him no time to do much more than sleep and eat besides. He was immensely popular in the parish, as he had been at Cambridge, and as high-spirited and amusing as ever; but all his old habits seemed to have been shorn from him at a stroke. He spent no money on himself, drank no wine, and lived as sparsely as an anchorite. None of the men with whom he worked and lived in the bare untidy clergy-house were much over thirty, and most of them were younger. They had tremendous 'rags' with one another, and the vicar had an always applauded trick of putting the strongest of them on to the floor and holding him there in an entirely helpless position. They usually took off their cassocks for these recreative contests, but wore them otherwise, in the house and in the streets.

They were cheerful muscular ascetics. They had reduced their own bodily wants to the barest minimum, and were entirely at the service, night and day, of the poorest of those amongst whom they lived. In the untiring ungrudging energy of youth they drew an amount of satisfaction out of their hard devoted lives as is vouchsafed to none of those who live for their own pleasure. "It's the best life in the world," said George's friend to him. "Why don't you make up your mind to come in, George? You'll never regret it."

But there was another side to the life. The church,

blazing with lights, and gay with decorations of a gaudier kind than are commonly seen except in those of the Roman Communion, held to a ritual which had not failed to get the vicar into trouble with the authorities. It drew the masses. On Sundays the church was crammed full of the poorest kind of people. It was hardly ever empty at any time. Mass was said every morning, and the regular offices at other times of the day and night. George's friend spoke in a different voice when he talked of the services in the church. "I never knew what religion was before," he said, while a sort of subdued glow spread itself over his good-looking immature face. "It's everything there is, to keep you up, and make you happy, all the time. Sometimes when I'm out about the place, and everything seems dreadful and hopeless, I think of the services in the church; especially of the Mass in the early morning before it gets light. It puts it all right. It's like all the pleasure we used to look forward to, and a thousand times greater, because it's part of the whole thing, and the best part. These poor wretches about here feel it too. They love it. If you were to take it away from them, they wouldn't know what joy meant."

George saw it dimly. He saw that for such as Stuckley, enthusiastic and emotional, this coloured ritual expression of devotion took the place of the distractions which he had so completely put behind him, and was far stronger than they to give him pleasure; that this daily tangible sustenance of the spirit was beyond all value to him. And he saw that the same life and colour stood to the very poor for everything they could know of it outside their own sordid lives, and irradiated them with its light. He had proof enough of that from what he had seen of them; it could not be denied.

But to him it brought no devotional stimulus. The richly vested priests before the lighted altar, the coming

and going of servers and acolytes, the swinging of censers and ringing of bells, the quick muttered words, the brisk genuflections, even the pealing out of the organ and the singing of strange half-barbaric strains, afflicted him to deep discomfort. The familiar service which was beginning to mean much to him, was transformed into something wholly alien. It was almost as if these priests of the Church of England were ashamed of the beautiful words of their own liturgy, and by mumbling and racing over them desired to give them the sound of a foreign tongue. Were not words so carefully chosen, consecrated by the use of centuries to this act of worship, designed for their own sake to be the channel of communication between the human and the divine? It seemed so to him, at any rate.

Oh, but the act was so much more than words, said his friend. It was so important to emphasise it. All ritual tended to that end; the words themselves were ritual, where they did not depart from the universal use of ages. Where they did so they were apt to give a wrong turn to the thoughts, or at least to confuse them. And what did these poor people, who knelt in face of the altar and felt themselves in the very holiest Presence, care for the balanced words of Reformation divines? They meant nothing to them. They were archaic, however pleasing to the cultured ear. The great act of sacrifice they did care for, and understood it.

The answer did not satisfy him; nor did he come to feel more at home in the church which gave such joy and refreshment to these men in the midst of their splendid toil. The impulse to take the final step did not come from his visits to this parish, although he enjoyed the work he did there during the weeks he was in London.

And he missed it afterwards—that or similar work—increasingly. The savour had gone out of the life which

he had thought he would so much enjoy. He had gone too far and seen too much to be content simply to amuse himself, however innocently. Before the year was up, he had strong desires to carry out his original intentions, to take Orders, and to settle down somewhere where he could have enough work to employ him. But still he could not make up his mind to an irrevocable giving up of himself body and soul to that calling, wherever it should lead him.

He was not a man to fly to others for advice in a difficulty of this sort. The good old man who had taught him had died, full of years and honour, or he might have brought himself to talk to him. There was no one else he felt inclined to go to. Ralph divined something of his difficulties, but said nothing.

It was Henry French who cut the knot for him. He had no doubts upon the subject at all, and felt no difficulty in introducing it. George was almost like one of his own sons. He saw him uneasy in his mind, and divined the cause, as far as it lay in him to divine it. "You want work to do," he said. "All of us are the better for work to do. I'll give you plenty of it, if you take Orders and come and help me here. You are cut out for it, George. You'll be all the happier if you settle yourself down."

George expressed something of his doubts. The Rector put them aside. "I was in much the same position as you," he said. "I should never have taken Orders if I hadn't been a younger son, and if it hadn't been the obvious thing for me to have this living. I didn't take it seriously until after I left Cambridge—not even as seriously as you have. But I wouldn't go back on it now. One is doing a good work to the best of one's ability. It grows on you. I used to be inclined to envy my brother as the elder son. I was laughing with him over it the other day. But I wouldn't change places with him now."

"I should like to come here," said George. "I should be quite contented, perhaps for some years to come. And I should like to hold a country living later on. If I thought that I was right to plan things in that way, I don't think I should hesitate."

"But why don't you think you'd be right. What could you do better? Men like you are wanted in the country livings. Lots of them can't be held by poor men. This one couldn't. It hardly more than pays my curate's stipend, and I spend on it much more than I get."

"It is because the life is so attractive to me—outside the religious aspect of it altogether."

"My dear boy; it wouldn't be attractive to you if you were not ready for what you call the religious aspect. You're not the sort that takes a snug living and does as little work as possible. You're not looking forward to that sort of life; you wouldn't be happy in it. Your work would be a great part of your life, wherever you settled, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I think so—now."

"Of course it would. And the work grows on you, as I said. After all, George, religion is a real thing, for you and me, isn't it? One grows, one's ideas change, if one follows the light honestly. One goes into it, perhaps almost light-heartedly, and one is led on. You've experienced that yourself. You had no doubts of this sort a year ago. I must confess that I had none until a good deal later. Then I was committed; I'm glad I was. So will you be if you once make up your mind."

"Where will one be led?" asked George, with a smile. "Perhaps not to a country parish, with a good house and a nice garden."

"Perhaps not. Though everything seems to point that way in your case. But isn't it a bit cowardly to funk it, George? One can only take one step at a time. Don't

shrink from taking the one that seems pointed out to you so clearly. Leave the next for the future. Whatever it may be, if it's pointed out to you clearly, you'll be given the courage to take it. Both of us believe that. It's a bad thing to look too far ahead."

George took Orders, and settled down in Roding. He had been quite happy there for eighteen months. He had a little house of his own on the outskirts of the town, well-furnished, with some of the effects he had inherited, and managed for him by a man and his wife, old servants of his father's. He dispensed much hospitality there. His friends came to stay with him, and there was always something for them to do. A great deal of cricket was played at the surrounding houses. The hunting was good. George kept two horses, and had room in his stable for two more. He could have accepted invitations to shoot most days in the week during the season, if he had had time; and he did shoot a good deal, and hunted one day a week regularly besides. In the summer he played cricket on most evenings with members of the Roding Cricket Club, and sometimes for whole days at one or other of the country houses near, where he also went frequently for lawn tennis, and often stayed to dine. He was very well liked by the squires and Parsons and their families, most of whom he had known since his boyhood, and was much in demand as a well-to-do bachelor, good at games and field sports, and of birth and position rather above those of the average country curate.

His work was never neglected. He had made a firm rule from the beginning under no circumstances whatever to allow pleasure to stand before any call of duty. But his regular duties were not arduous, and the Rector did a great deal of work himself that a less energetic man might have left to his curate. Besides, George was of the most methodical habits. He never idled. Many of the hours during

which he was out of doors another man would have spent in an armchair. It must be confessed that he read very little.

Now as he sat in Ralph's arm-chair, in unwonted quiescence, he asked himself whether he was quite satisfied with his life, and to what it was leading him. He saw more clearly than he had ever done before how he had changed, and wondered whether the change was still going on in him.

But the answer to the question was not plain yet.

CHAPTER VIII

A THEATRE AND A CHAPEL

"DEAR old George! How jolly to have you here!"

Ralph had come up the stairs, three at a time, as he had used to come up to their old rooms. George had almost expected him to burst in and throw his cap and gown on the sofa. He did put his hat and coat there, and asked, "Got the kettle boiling?" as he had been accustomed to.

"I've been down in the constituency," he said with a grin. "Sounds important, doesn't it? Nothing like beginning early."

He was full of life and energy, and talked enthusiastically about what he was doing with himself as they drank their tea together. "I like the job," he said. "I'd no idea I should take to it half so keenly. I'm getting up all sorts of subjects. I generally work here in the mornings; and sometimes I go to the British Museum, if I can't get hold of a book I want. But you can't smoke there; it's rather a bore."

"What do you do for exercise?" asked George.

"Well, that's the trouble in London, in the winter. You've got the pull over me there. I fence sometimes, and I'm going to play racquets. I've just joined Queen's. But it's a long way off. The afternoons are rather deadly. In the evenings I can amuse myself all right, and I often go up to the constituency then. It's difficult to see people at other times. We've had one or two meetings. I'm getting quite a decent speaker, George."

"I should like to hear you. You haven't got a meeting to-night, have you?"

"Oh, no. I've scratched up a dinner to-night, in your honour. You didn't give me much notice or I'd have got a lot of fellows. But I've secured Hugh Temple and Dick Bonner. We're going to dine at Brooks's, in the odour of respectability. After that we're going to 'The Pearl of Peru.' I've taken a box. Will that suit you?"

George said it would. "I haven't seen a play for months," he said.

"We shall have a good laugh," said Ralph. "Edmund George is jolly good in it. I say, old boy, how long are you going to stay? We might go somewhere else to-morrow night."

"I can stay over to-morrow," said George, "but I've got something to do in the evening."

"Going to dine with a Bishop?"

George smiled. "I'm going to hear Dr. Merrow preach," he said.

"Dr. Merrow? What, the man who's coming to Roding?"

"Yes."

"What on earth are you going to do that for?"

"I've come up to see young Gosset. He has written to me. There is going to be a farewell meeting at which Dr. Merrow's old congregation is to take leave of him, and there's to be a service in the chapel. Percy Gosset asked me to come to that, and walk home with him afterwards. Poor chap, he's very unhappy."

"Gosset kicked him out of Roding, didn't he? What has happened over that business?"

"Nothing has happened particularly. But there's a lot of talk about it in Roding."

"I say, George, I can't quite understand father taking

such a strong line against his marrying the girl. I should have thought it would have been the obvious thing to do. Of course Gosset would hate it but after all, it wouldn't be such a frightful come-down."

"I don't know about that," said George. "When you've gone about your constituency a bit longer, you'll find that there are a lot more grades in society than you've had any idea of. Besides a man in Gosset's position is a good deal higher than a working-man."

"Oh, well, yes. Still it's father I don't quite understand. He couldn't press it, of course; but I should have thought he would have been glad if it had happened. But he set himself definitely against it. What do you think about it yourself?"

George paused before replying. "I suppose, if he had thought she was a good sort of a girl," he said, rather slowly, "he wouldn't have been against it. But you heard what he said on that night he told us. The boy had made a bad mistake. He didn't want him to suffer for it all his life."

"Is she a bad sort of girl?" said Ralph. "Mother sees her, doesn't she?"

"Yes. She has been very good to her. I don't know what she thinks of her. She doesn't talk about it at all."

"Dear mother! I expect it was a great shock to her to learn that things of that sort went on in the world at all. I rather wonder that she doesn't want him to marry her."

"Perhaps she does," said George. "Though I've no reason to say so."

"What do you think about it, George?" asked Ralph again.

George stirred rather uneasily in his chair. "I don't think much about it," he said. "The Rector has taken his line. He knows better than I do."

"Oh, come now, George! It isn't like you to shirk things

in that way. Besides, you've taken an interest in the youth. You've got your finger in the pie."

"I'm not shirking it," said George. "On the general question I'm quite ready to leave it to the Rector, as I said. On the particular question I feel I have to know the boy better before I form any opinion. If I come to think differently from what Cousin Henry thinks, I shall say so."

Ralph had to be contented with this. "Can't you ask him here and have a talk with him?" he asked. "If you can only spare two nights it's a pity to have to give one of them up."

"Well, I should like to hear Dr. Merrow preach," said George. "I shan't be able to when he comes to Roding. Besides, I can't see Percy in any other way. They keep him almost locked up. Gosset was annoyed at his coming to see me before he left Roding. He's to be soaked in what Gosset call 'vital religion,' which means that he's to have none of the recreations that are good for a fellow of his age, and all the people he sees are to be of the same colour. I'm not one of them. If I try to make friends with him, as one man to another, I'm supposed to be proselytising."

"Don't they let him amuse himself at all? There's a big chapel in my constituency where they have all sorts of clubs and societies for the dissenting youth, just as they have them in connection with Stuckley's church. They don't keep those fellows locked up. Why shouldn't he join something of that sort?"

"He is with very old-fashioned people. That sort of thing is suspect—I suppose because we first showed the way to it. It has nothing to do with vital religion."

"They must be a queer lot. Are you going to turn up at Dr. Merrow's Chapel and come across young Gosset unexpectedly?"

"It is what he proposed, poor beggar. They've got him under their thumb entirely. I went to Gosset and told him that Percy had asked me to come and see him, and wanted me to hear Dr. Merrow preach to-night. He couldn't very well make any objection, though he said a lot of things that I don't particularly want to remember, about disturbing his mind. But it was going to hear Dr. Merrow that settled it. He wanted me to do that. He thinks we have no preachers at all in the Church. He said I should hear something of a sort that I had never heard before."

Ralph's dinner at Brooks's Club was a decorous proceeding. The four young men, somewhat subdued by the stately solemnity of their surroundings, and two of them also by George's clerical attire, talked over old times and old friends, and drank less wine than they had been accustomed to drink on similar occasions in the past. One of the guests had started work in his father's office in the city, the other was still reading in chambers in the Temple. Neither of them, as yet, looked upon their work as anything but a necessity, which an adequate fortune, coming from elsewhere, would have relieved them of. It was the last thing they wished to talk of when away from it, and their lives were lived in the evenings, on Saturdays and Sundays, and during the very generous holidays that the one was allowed, and the other allowed himself. George was glad to meet them again. They brought back the old life, which had been so pleasant; but somehow they made it seem still farther away.

After dinner they went to a theatre in the Strand, and entered it as the musical play which they had come to see was in full swing. The comedian who was the star of the piece was on the stage, and they were soon laughing heartily at him. George had not laughed so much for months. He had no very subtle taste in humour; nor had the actor who

was so much amusing him. But he was sharp and lively and comical, and clever at making all his points.

The piece was very well staged. The lights, the carefully blended colours, the suggestion of tropical splendour in the scenery, the graceful dancing of the troops of pretty girls, the catching music, which included sentimental songs as well as brighter airs, the fun and the laughter, made up an entertainment in which only the most hypercritical could have found the slightest hint of offence. It was all froth—iridescent, unsatisfying, innocuous froth. The people who thronged the theatre night after night for the sake of it enjoyed a few hours' exhilaration and went away to forget all about it. Where was the harm?

George asked himself that question some hours later when he had taken leave of Ralph, after a long midnight talk, and was alone in his room. He could see no harm; probably there was none. And yet he felt a shade of depression at the memory of it, and of his own laughter and fleeting enjoyment. He had never felt like that before, when he and Ralph and perhaps one or two others had been to just such an entertainment as this. He had enjoyed the evening, and being with his friends again; but he did not want too much of this sort of enjoyment. It was more satisfactory to go to bed tired after a hard day in the saddle, or in the cricket field. Probably his country life, which suited him so well, was unfitting him for these more ephemeral amusements. At any rate, he would not be sorry to be back in his quiet little house in Roding, where it would be very still now, and the air coming in through his open bedroom window would be very sweet; unlike this stale London air, which bore on it the sounds of the unquiet city, never resting night or day.

The next evening, after an early dinner at his club, he made his way through the noisy street to the chapel in

which Dr. Merrow had preached for the past five and twenty years. For as long as he himself had lived, this man had been exercising his ministry here. During the years of his unconscious babyhood the work had begun, full of hope and confidence. During his careless boyhood it had gone on, becoming widely known, attracting more and more within its influence. During the years in which his own thoughts had been drawn towards a somewhat similar work, and since, it had been nearing its close. Five and twenty years of sermon-making and sermon-delivery—for there had been no other work in connection with this chapel; nothing but two services every Sunday, and one on a fixed day of the week—what was there to show for it?

The tide of busy life washed the dingy front of the big building, which was situated in a wide thoroughfare, now mostly given up to shops and business premises. Only a negligible number of those who passed it in the roaring street had ever been inside its doors; it stood for nothing in the lives of the very poor, whose homes were huddled away behind the shops and offices. A few of the more respectable dwellers in the neighbourhood might come occasionally to hear the famous preacher, or even form part of the regular congregation. The people who crowded to it Sunday after Sunday came from all over London, some of them from different parts of the world. Its fame was greater in the big cities of America than in the narrow streets immediately behind it. In the slang of the more intolerant it was a preaching-shop. Whose were the lives moulded by the message delivered week after week and year after year within its walls?

As George neared the building he found himself in a stream of people, most of whom were also bound for it. The social part of the leave-taking, speech-making, testi-

monial-giving, had taken place elsewhere in the afternoon. He had read about it in the later evening papers over his dinner. There had been Cabinet Ministers on the platform, and Members of both Houses of Parliament. Much regret had been expressed at the loss that the closing of Dr. Merrow's work would be to London; stress had been laid upon the fact that, although a man of strong convictions who had never feared to speak out in support of them, he had many personal friends amongst those who differed from him, and some of them were there on the platform that afternoon to show their appreciation of him, and the great work he had done amongst them.

It was possibly owing to the presence of these dissentient well-wishers, that little stress had been laid upon the details of Dr. Merrow's work, which, outside his chapel, had concerned itself largely with those very matters in which his convictions were not theirs. But an ardent follower had drawn attention to the fact that Dr. Merrow was not laying aside his ministry altogether, even in the few years in which it was necessary that he should rest for the sake of his health. He had accepted a call to a country church, and would take up his ministry almost immediately. Though no longer, for a time, in the forefront of the battle, he would still be fighting. There were Augean stables to cleanse in the country as well as in the towns. They might almost say that the country as it existed in England to-day wanted more of the light that Dr. Merrow had shed abroad so abundantly than the big towns. He was going forth, as it were, as a missionary to the dark places of the earth—a pioneer missionary, where few men of his calibre had been before. While deeply regretting the loss to themselves, they wished him God-speed in the new work to which he was about to devote himself.

George had smiled at the report of this speech, ignoring

as it did the vast network of religious activity that covered the whole of rural England, and the many great men who had lived their saintly lives and thought their deep thoughts in country parsonages; men whose names were assured of immortality, as Dr. Merrow's was not yet; other men whose names were forgotten, but whose powers had been not less than his, though less widely advertised.

Then he ceased to smile, and wondered if this particular speech represented Dr. Merrow's own ideas. Was Roding, in spite of its fine church and the ordered active work in connection with it, to be considered one of the dark places of the earth, and himself a missionary to it? If so, wouldn't there be a very rude awakening for him?

He remembered Gosset's vulgarly pretentious chapel in a side street, its cockney spire outstripping the noble tower of the fourteenth century church by a few feet, as Gosset's plans had arranged for it to do; the respectable congregation that met there, with Gosset himself the leader of it, and socially its foremost figure; the small significance in the life of the town of all that went on there; the constant endeavour to claim notice, even if hostile. If there were stables to be cleaned in Roding, a man who had the opportunity might begin with the jealousies and pettinesses that hung about the walls of Roding chapel. But this was hardly the sort of cleansing that the speaker had had in his mind.

What sort of a chance would a man of Dr. Merrow's reputation have in the movements he no doubt had had in his mind? Roding was a very small town, and there were no large ones within miles of it. Whence would he draw his congregations? There would be many who would go to hear him preach out of curiosity, a very few who might continue to go, and forsake the Church. The great majority would go on as they always had done.

Where would he find his friends? Not even all of the neighbouring clergy would call upon him; scarcely any of the neighbouring squires would do so. He would not meet with hostility, unless he chose to invite it; it would be indifference, but indifference so complete that it was hard to see how he could make the slightest headway against it.

George suddenly saw something of the huge ponderous weight of established life and custom in rural England, and the buttress it forms to the Established Church. There was nothing like it in any other country of the world. All differences, all competition, existed below a certain social stratum, except in the rare instances in which Roman Catholicism asserted itself, from some great house. Above that level, which was not a high one, no other form of religion stirred the suave self-satisfied air. Only a current was beginning to be felt from the growing habit of following pleasure instead of church-going. For a man to assert himself against that mountain weight of settled habit—to say nothing of gaining a foothold from which he could begin to cleanse Augean stables—he must be a Hercules indeed.

The people who were making their way towards the chapel on foot seemed to be mostly of one class. Women were in the preponderance, though not so much as they would have been in the case of a service in a cathedral or a big church. They seemed to have come, almost all of them, from the suburbs, or from some distant part of residential London. The omnibuses that moved along the broad asphalt in the same direction were also full of them. They walked quickly, talking cheerfully and even gaily together, as if anticipating an evening's excitement. Many of them carried Bibles, with limp covers, secured by elastic bands. The men wore tall hats and dark overcoats mostly, but not as if that costume had any special significance; the women were dressed with an eye to comfort rather than to fashion.

All seemed to be of the great middle-class, whose comings and goings are unheeded, whose lives afford no material even for fiction, and who yet form a dense phalanx of respectably-educated, comfortably-living people, beside which the classes that are talked of and written about are but a handful. By their numbers and cohesion they were cut off both from those above and below them in the social scale. Even the substrata into which they were themselves divided, chiefly by greater or lesser amount of income, and the residential quarters they inhabited, were more separate and distinct than the division of broad classes in the country. The respectable clerks and their families who inhabited the thirty and forty pound a year houses would have few friends amongst those who lived in the eighty or a hundred pound a year villas. Still less would they know anything of the lives of the poor who might be their neighbours. These divisions are of the great cities, where alone people can live amongst those of precisely the same circumstances as themselves. And the more well to do of the sheer middle class, distinct from the professional as from the trading classes, of whom the bulk of these people hurrying to the chapel was made up, is exclusively of the large towns. It is not to be found in the country. If an atom of it strays there it loses the characteristics of the whole, and exerts no influence of itself whatever. Only a man of it, who would emerge from the ruck anywhere, is to be found here and there to make its ideas count; and those ideas seldom persist into the next generation. There was no such man in Roding. George felt himself to be amongst strangers, as much as he would have done if he had been walking the streets of an American city. And yet these people were more numerous in London than any other sort, except those who work with their hands. They supported hundreds of churches and chapels, and in other big towns of England

hundreds more, in which scarcely a worshipper was to be found who came from any other environment. There would be no difficulty in filling any building to overflowing from them, where a popular preacher was to be heard.

Motor-cars and carriages were in evidence as George neared the chapel, and well-dressed people got out of them and passed through the throng at the doors and in the lobbies. They seemed to pass right through the crowd, and he found it was possible to get into the building at once by paying sixpence, although the doors were not yet opened. He felt some repugnance at this charge and waited with the rest.

Presently the doors were opened and they pushed in, not without some elbowing and crushing.

CHAPTER IX

DR. MERROW

THE crushing and pushing ceased the moment the inner swing doors were passed. George found himself in a large hall, brilliantly lit, which bore not the smallest resemblance to any church he had ever been inside of, except that the windows were of Gothic design, and the floor was fitted with pews.

A broad banked-up gallery ran round three sides of the building, the front rows of which were already full, and into which people were pouring from all sides, in exactly the same way as they pour into the galleries of a theatre or concert-hall when the pent-up tide is set free. At the other end, where the altar would have stood in a church, was a large railed-in platform, with a reading desk in the middle, and an ordinary comfortable easy chair behind it. Behind the platform and rising up to the roof were the serried pipes of a large organ. On a level with the gallery was the organist's seat, quite open to view. The organist came in as George stood in a passage between the pews, and sliding on to his seat pulled out stops and began to play, the tails of his frock-coat hanging ungracefully over the back of the bench.

The people were drafted, singly and in little groups, into the pews. This was done by one or two men in each aisle, who went about their work busily and confidently, as if they enjoyed it. They smiled and beckoned, as they went up and down, and sometimes bent to say a word to some one already seated.

George was shown with one or two more into a seat somewhere near the middle of the chapel. It was comfortably cushioned, and there was a large hassock for each person on the carpeted floor, but he was the only one who used his for kneeling on, although the others sat forward and rested their foreheads on the book rail in front of them, after settling themselves. An old white-whiskered gentleman sitting with his wife at the end of the pew took books from a baize covered box in front of him and passed them down with a pleasant smile—a hymn-book and a book of chants and anthems to each.

The pews filled up fast. By-and-by all were full, and the men in the aisles began to put up seats fastened on hinges to the ends of the pews. It was not long before each of them had an occupant, and then there were nods and signalling from the officials, and the stream of incomers ceased, and for the first time something like quiet settled upon the vast assembly.

But it was not complete silence. Even above the sound of the organ could be heard a murmur of conversation. All over the place heads were inclined to one another and talk went on, not generally in whispers. The old gentleman at the end of George's pew, and his wife, were both reading to themselves out of big Bibles, and some others here and there seemed to be preparing their minds in some such way for a religious service, although none were on their knees. But for the most part the people in the pews looked about them, or talked to their neighbours.

Two doors underneath the organ and on either side of the platform opened, and a little procession of men came from each. They were mostly elderly; all of them were dressed in frock coats; nearly all of them wore beards. The closeness to type was almost laughable. George thought that henceforward he would have no difficulty in recog-

nizing a deacon of a nonconformist chapel, if he met one in the street. They walked solemnly, with a slight air of self-importance, to different seats in the body of the chapel, and one of them went to a desk facing the congregation, immediately beneath the one on the platform.

At the same time a tall, slight, grey-haired figure came on to the platform itself, and advanced to the desk. It was Dr. Merrow, who was to lead this great assembly in prayer and praise, and deliver his message to them for the last time.

The organ went on playing, the hum of conversation grew a little louder if anything; the officials in the aisles were still passing up and down with armfuls of books, from which they gave out one here and there.

Dr. Merrow stood at his desk, facing the congregation. He lifted his head and shut his eyes, and stood like that for about half a minute, while the noise of the organ gradually lessened, but the talking and the movement did not.

The sense of strangeness that had affected George from the time he had entered became tinged with distaste. It seemed to him incredible that a man wishing to be for a moment alone with God before entering upon a solemn service should not kneel down and bury his face in his hands. How could he stand up like this, with thousands of eyes fixed upon his uncovered face, to perform his act of devotion; and why did he do it? It would need nerves of steel and the hide of a pachyderm not to feel those thousands of eyes upon him. There seemed more effrontery than devotion in it. It seemed to point and justify the common criticism of nonconformist methods of worship,—that the man in the pulpit is the centre of everything. There was certainly nothing in the arrangement of the building that did not support that criticism; nor, so far, had there been anything in the demeanour of the people who filled it.

George felt as little at home here as he had felt in the ritualistic East-end church, and even less attuned to worship.

The organ ceased, the men with the books sank quietly into the seats left vacant for them, the hum of talk died away into silence. Dr. Merrow's eyes remained closed, but he lifted his hand. Then after a long pause, he said in a low voice, and with pauses between each single word: "Lord — abide — with — us — for — the — night—is—far—spent!"

He remained with his hand uplifted and his eyes closed for an appreciable time after the words had ceased, and the congregation remained bending forward, half of them, at least, with their eyes fixed upon him, in complete silence. Then he dropped his hand, opened his eyes, and turned away to take his seat in the easy chair behind the desk.

The congregation settled itself back with an audible stir, and, immediately, the official seated below the platform rose to his feet and announced the number of a hymn. There was a loud rustling of leaves, and the organist broke out at the earliest possible second of time and played the tune over briskly.

George began to wish he had not come. The preacher's whole attitude and delivery seemed to him affected and exaggerated to the last degree, the effort towards solemnity absurdly ill-calculated, and entirely failing of its purpose; for there was no sign of heightened seriousness on the part of the congregation, who turned the pages of their books, sitting back in their cushioned seats, with the same air of satisfied interest with which they had watched the place fill and talked together while they were waiting. Was this theatrical utterance of a phrase a preparation for worship worthy to be compared with the solemn words of introduction to a service in the Church, consecrated by centuries of use, in which all joined without a thought of the

man who was leading them, in which each one for himself drew nearer to God according as his heart echoed the words that came from his lips? True that the words might be gabbled over, so familiar were they, without a thought of their significance; but was not far more lost than was gained by the substitution of surprise for self-recollection; and what could be the state of mind of a man who could deliberately prepare this kind of surprise beforehand? Words so uttered could hardly be the natural form of expression of any man.

The whole congregation joined heartily in the singing of the hymn.

Begone unbelief!
My Saviour is near,
And for my relief
Will surely appear.
By prayer let me wrestle,
And he will perform;
With Christ in the vessel,
I smile at the storm.

Neither words nor tune were known to George, but must have been well-known to the majority of those present, for there could scarcely have been a voice silent in the packed assembly. The swinging old-fashioned tune lent itself to combined singing. The organ blared it out without much regard for niceties of accompaniment, but the noise of the pipes only provided a background for the swelling voices, which rose far above them.

During the singing of the hymn, while the whole congregation was standing, Dr. Merrow sat back in his easy chair, his lips moving slightly to the words, his thin hand every now and then rising and falling gently. He looked very tired. His face was thin and long, the cheeks rather sunken, the mouth full and mobile. He kept his eyes fixed upon the book on his knee, and nothing could be seen of

their expression. There was nothing arresting in his appearance as he sat there with his long legs crossed—no hint of a commanding or compelling personality. He was of the type of the quiet scholar, with an intellectual brow, and a head bowed with poring over books. His grey hair was thin and close-cut, his face clean-shaven, his clothes of an unobtrusive semi-clerical cut. He looked like a University don, well-bred, rather shy and retiring, suffering somewhat from ill-health.

When the hymn had been sung he came forward and read a short passage from the large Bible on the desk in front of the platform. He read carefully and slowly, with no hint of the theatricalism of his first utterance, and indeed with no oratorical effort whatever. Many of the people followed the reading in their own Bibles; all of them were very quiet and attentive. For the few minutes during which it lasted the great assembly seemed to have contracted itself into a family circle, reading and weighing the Word together. During this quiet reading George's mental attitude of protest relaxed. For the first time he felt himself in an atmosphere of reverence.

After a psalm had been sung Dr. Merrow delivered a long extemporary prayer. Here again he had dropped all oratorical arts, and spoke simply and in simple language. The form was strange to George; he was in no way repelled by it, but neither was he uplifted. It was impossible for him with his training to give himself over to its current, as did the people around him, many of whom were breathing deep acquiescence as it proceeded, and sometimes breaking into audible ejaculation. He could not get rid of the feeling of expectancy, the oppression of the human personality forging a new channel of communication with the Divine, putting simple and universal petitions into words which must have required some accessory effort of

mind to vary each time they were used, when the petitions themselves called for no variance of language.

But if, in George's case, the wings of the spirit were not unfurled, as he had known them to be by the oft-used supplications of his own Church, criticism was stilled by the quiet seriousness with which the prayer was offered. He had not come to criticise, and indeed the lust of criticism was as little part of his character as would be possible in any thinking being. This was the method of common prayer understood and accepted by the people around him, but responded to it in their hearts as they would probably not have responded to a pre-created scheme of petition. It was the antithesis to the method of the ritualists. Neither method seemed to him as fitting as that of the middle way; but there was no denying that in each case the spirit of worship was aroused. In the ritualistic church it had shone out above the distraction caused by the constant ceremonial mechanism of the service; here it subdued the cheerful mundane bustle which these people brought into the very heart of their temple of worship, and turned for a time the crowded unlovely building into a house of prayer.

The sermon was delivered immediately after another hymn had been sung. The introductory service had not lasted for much more than twenty minutes. The people settled themselves in their seats, as if what they had come for was only now about to begin.

The text was given out twice. "And we have seen, and do testify, that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world."

The sermon began quietly. Afterwards, George could not remember much that the preacher had said for the first ten minutes or so. His delivery was almost monotonous, and if he had read what he spoke—his eyes fixed first upon one point amongst the sea of faces confronting him, then

upon another—it was unlikely that he would have held the attention of most of them. It was an ordinary exposition of theology, expressed in ordinary language, and as if the preacher himself took much of what he was saying for granted, and set it forth as a matter of not very inspiring duty.

George was conscious of a growing sense of disappointment. Possessing few of the qualities of a good preacher himself, except that of sincerity, and with no very clear idea of what they consisted, he had yet come to the point of recognizing that they were not summed up in the delivery of unexceptionable truths in well-chosen language. Pulpit oratory was a real thing, apart altogether from the subject upon which it was exercised, and Dr. Merrow was commonly reported to possess it. Surely a delivery of this sort could not have packed the chapel as it was packed to-night, or sent his fame far across the sea. You could hear sermons as good as this in many a half-empty church.

It struck George that his attitude was one of dejection. His whole bearing showed that he was desperately tired; his voice was weak, though it had a quality that caused it to carry; his face was lined, and had an expression almost of physical pain. Perhaps this ordeal was too much for him. He would content himself with delivering his carefully prepared sermon, saving himself as much as possible, and especially so by refraining from all mention of the occasion upon which it was delivered. There had been not the allusion to the fact that it was to be his last sermon here, so far.

George threw a glance around him. All eyes were fixed upon the speaker; some of them were eager; some tender; all were interested.

He set himself to listen more closely, a little ashamed of himself that a closely reasoned argument, pursued evenly,

without any ornament of style or manner, should leave his thoughts wandering while it held others.

He found no difficulty in keeping his attention fixed. There was magnetism in the eyes that roamed here and there, and seemed occasionally to seek out his own. There was a *timbre* in the weak, almost droning voice that drew the ear. There was a quality in the easy natural language that was more than mere unstudied simplicity. The brain was interested, but as yet the spirit was not moved.

But presently there came a sentence, not detached and presented, but woven into the stuff of the discourse, like a knot of glowing gold in a sober tapestry, that touched a chord in George's heart and set it vibrating. It brought back to him the way of his old teacher, who had been little known as a preacher outside his own communion, and had cultivated none of the arts of the orator, but whose quiet words, transmuted in the glowing crucible of his beautiful spirit into light and fire that could kindle and illumine, had made him, to those who had ears to hear, one of the greatest preachers of his time.

Here was the same note—a ray of light from the depths of experience, of devotion, of sympathy, piercing to the very bones and marrow. No art of oratory could have produced it; it came from no such art. It was spoken so quietly that unless the spirit was open to receive it, it could have aroused no responsive thrill.

There came more of these sentences. The spark had caught; the furnace was beginning to glow. George gazed at the preacher with his own face alight. His surroundings were forgotten; he was back in the quiet country church again, listening to the well-remembered voice that had never failed to stir him. If this was the kind of preaching that had brought Dr. Merrow his great reputation, then he understood its appeal, and was himself moved by it. It

came from something beyond creeds, far beyond differences in methods of worship. It had been heard in all ages of the Church, amidst the splendours of mediæval superstition, as in the crude barrenness of modern revivalism. The spirit moved on the face of the waters; the stagnancy of mere words was broken; there was life and healing in them.

The words came faster. The voice grew stronger, and took on a different tone, as if on an organ a touch of reed had been added to diapason. The slightly bent figure became straighter, the worn face younger. The preacher began to use his hands—thin, flexible, nervous hands, which seemed to clutch at deep truths, and fling them out for the world to take hold of. Soon the burning words came in a torrent, as of a rushing mass of water of irresistible force, yet bound within its directing channel. Every now and then they sank to a deep calm, but were still infused with the same concentrative power. Such words had stirred men's minds and souls in long past ages. Spoken on bare hillsides underneath the symbol of faith, they had converted kingdoms. Flung forth over throngs of rough fighting men, they had turned bloodshed and rapine into righteous crusades. Their power was older than that of Christianity itself. In the dim ages of religious history it had singled out Aaron for the priesthood, and put him above Moses, the warrior leader. Later, it had burst the bonds of the priesthood itself, and winged the utterances of great prophets.

The sermon was a passionate exaltation of personal holiness, gained by contact with Christ the Saviour, and by that alone. Its sole reference to the occasion on which it was delivered was contained in a few quiet words at the close.

"In all the years I have spoken to you week after week in this place, I have striven to hold before you this central

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fact of our religion—Christ the Saviour of the world. If I have ever preached to you a single word not based upon that fact, those words have been naught—may God wipe them from the table of your memory! In these last words I shall speak to you here I hold it up once more. If there are any to whom, in my human weakness, I have not made it shine out as the one great fact, I pray—I beseech God, the Father of our dear Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ—that they may see it at last—now—to-night.”

He may have intended to say more, but the fire that had upheld him flickered and went out. With a word that was half a sob he shrank again into the weary overwrought man who had spent for a time the power vouchsafed him. He sat down and buried his face in his hands, while the official seated below him sprang up and gave out the number and opening words of a closing hymn.

CHAPTER X

HOME

GEORGE went back to Roding the next afternoon. He got there about four o'clock. It was one of those very still days that sometimes intervene in the blusterings of early March, and give an elusive air of spring having already settled down for good, although it will be weeks before the leaf-buds break, and the calendar still points to winter.

His dog-cart was waiting for him at the station, and he drove through the streets of the pleasant little country town to his house on the other side of it.

The station was about a quarter-of-a-mile from where the old town began, but the road was lined for that distance with a double row of small houses. It was the side on which the place had developed. The market actually adjoined the station, and there were one or two buildings for the storing and sale of produce which dated from before the station itself. It had always been the business quarter when Roding had been a purely agricultural centre. Now there were workshops in addition, and a small factory for the making of jam, which had been so skilfully conducted that there was talk of it developing into a large factory, when difficulties as to the purchase of land should have been got over. There was also a builder's yard. It was the business of which Morton was foreman, and he lived in one of the little red-brick villas that faced the main road. Beyond the station it was still pure country, rather flat, with grazing meadows and some agricultural land divided by deep hedgerows. The river ran through it, and its course

was marked by rows of pollarded willows, and occasionally by the spires of tall poplars. The church tower and thick trees of the next village, to which the road led straight, marked the end of the level land. Behind them the ground rose gently to the woods that closed in the view.

Roding was built on a low hill which the river half-encircled. The rows of new houses ceased suddenly at an ancient stone bridge, by the side of which was a tumble-down but very picturesque water-mill, and beyond it a sort of quay, backed by an irregular line of old cottages, the whole over-shadowed by giant elms and poplars. It was an approach that sometimes caused the now increasing tribe of motorists to stop and get out their cameras; though if they did so there was usually some grinding and jerking of gear when they started again; for round the corner of a low-browed, bow-windowed inn, which made part of the picture, the street rose very sharply.

Here were little old houses with their front doors opening right on to the pavements, and little poky shops, for the sale of sweetmeats, toys, tobacco of the less expensive brands, and vegetables that when displayed had an air of being second-hand. At the top of the short rise one was suddenly in the heart of the town. The street broadened, and was lined with the larger shops, interspersed with a few old dwelling-houses, and broken on one side by the long low line of the grammar school. Many of the shops had been refronted, and a few of them rebuilt; but the irregular line of tiled roofs and the red-brick chimney-stacks still remained, much as they had always been, and gave the street an old-fashioned air, which caused the tourists to congratulate themselves upon having come across another pleasant spot in the heart of rural England whose



Behind the High Street on the one side were the church and the rectory, and very little else. The rectory grounds sloped down to the river and ran along it below the churchyard, which was bounded by a low cliff. On the other side of the river were wide grass fields, which the road skirted at a considerable distance. On this side, Roding suddenly ceased. From the rectory garden the existence of the town would hardly have been suspected.

There was another street at the back of the High Street on the opposite side, in which the chapel was situated; and narrow lanes leading down to the fields again, with a bridge crossing the railway. But even here the open country began almost immediately, and there was a large farm, with out-buildings, rick-yard, walled garden, and hedge-enclosed orchard, which ran right along the railway itself.

The High Street widened at the other end, and forked into two country roads. Facing the town was the important front of the French Arms, which had been a well-known coaching-inn in its day, and now that the roads of England and its out-of-the-way towns were again in process of discovery, was enjoying a mild revival of its ancient glories. It had somehow survived the dead years without losing its character. Its rooms still contained their solid, lumbering furniture; the fare it offered to the traveller was much the same as it had offered him a hundred years before, and had not deteriorated in quality; the innkeeper wore corduroys and gaiters, and was a bit of a farmer besides; and his wife had that cheerful bustling presence which is such a valuable asset to old-fashioned country inns.

Altogether, a pleasant little town, with enough going on to keep it contentedly alive, and not so caught in the net of progress as to be in danger of losing its leisured comfortable air. A town in which you could gain a sense of the ~~very~~ picturesque past, if you spent a night in it during



a journey on which you were on the lookout for such impressions, and one in which you might be inclined to envy those whose permanent lot was laid there.

George's cottage was on the road which turned to the right when it left the town, but when he came to the inn he pulled up his horse, and turned its head to the left.

"I'll drive round by Farncombe," he said to his groom.

The road wound down the hill under high overhanging trees on a sandy bank. When the stables of the inn had been left behind, and the slope began, there were no more signs of habitation. The town had suddenly disappeared; but on looking back the church could have been seen, until a turn in the road hid it, and, in winter, the roofs of some of the houses, through the trees.

The road took another turn to the left when it reached the bottom of the hill, and a house came into view. It was of three stories, built of white brick, and seemed by its architecture to date from forty to fifty years back. It was of the sort that may be seen in any old established suburb of London, with a flight of steps leading up to the hall door in the middle, plate-glass windows to rooms on either side, and everything regular and rectangular under a slate-covered roof. Stables and coach house were pressed up against the side of the house, which stood only a few yards from the road, and was approached by a gravel sweep entering at one swing gate and leaving at another. The house looked curiously out of place in a lonely country lane such as this was; as if it had confidently expected to be joined by neighbouring houses of a similar pattern, and had confined its frontage in consequence.

This house had stood empty for many years. It was so unlike what any one would expect a country house of its size to be, that in spite of good rooms, fine views, and an

always lessening demand for rentage or purchase, no one had been found bold enough to face existence in it.

But now, as George passed it, it was the centre of activity. Its dilapidations seemed to have demanded a complete overhauling of the structure, and a frame-work of scaffolding was being erected which had already reached the eaves of the roof. It was the house that Dr. Merrow had taken, and George's groom told him that a lot of money was to be spent on it, the work was to be pushed forward as quickly as possible, and directly it was finished the house would be occupied.

George's thoughts on the subjects were rather different from what they would have been if he had passed the house a few days before. Then he would have considered it only fitting that this cockney-built house should have been hit upon by somebody who was coming to Roding to serve the cockney-built chapel. Now he rather wondered that Dr. Merrow should have chosen it. Still, its defects were on the surface. It would be a comfortable roomy house to live in, and once inside it the air of peaceful seclusion, which came from its situation, would be not less than if it had been built more in harmony with its surroundings. He looked with interest at the work that was going on. He recalled with some interest Gosset's statement to him that Mrs. Merrow was an heiress, "equal to the highest." Probably that meant that she had a comfortable income of her own. And Dr. Merrow himself would not be without some means. He would be able to lead a restful, retired life here, and if he cared for the beauties of nature, they would be all around him.

George drove along the winding country lane, and came in the course of a mile or two to a pretty village, of which one of the first houses was the Vicarage, standing back from the road in a well-treed garden.

The vicar's study was in front of the house, and he himself could be seen seated at his writing-table, with the window wide open to the evening sunshine.

George pulled up at the gate and gave him a hail, and he came out to him. He was Mr. Curtis, the father of the girl whom Miss Budd had thought so unsuitable as a friend for Sylvia. He was a man some years short of sixty, sturdily built, with a pointed grey beard, and a look of honesty and capability. He had known George from his boyhood.

"You've been up to London, haven't you?" he asked. "Sylvia told Myra you were staying with Ralph. How is he?"

George told him how Ralph was, and they talked together for a few minutes about the weather, and about the ball that was to take place at Roding Court in the following week.

Then Mr. Curtis said: "You must have passed 'The Limes.' Fancy its being taken at this time of the day; and by such a shining light too! Did you see Dr. Merrow when he was in Roding last year?"

"Not to speak to," said George. "But I went to hear him preach last night."

"Went to hear him preach, did you? Well, there are some of our good neighbours who would say you had done very wrong, George. But he's said to be a fine preacher. What did you think of him?"

"I thought he was one of the finest preachers I had ever heard," said George.

"Well—they *can* preach—most of them. Of course, it's the chief thing with them. I don't know where he'll draw his congregation from here, through. It seems an odd thing, his coming here at all. He's bound to feel frightfully out of it."

"From what I was told afterwards, I think he is coming

here for a complete rest. He's been ill, and would have had a breakdown if he had gone on in London. Still, I suppose he won't shut himself up entirely. I suppose you'll call on him?"

"Oh, yes. I shall. He'll be one of my nearest neighbours. But there will be lots who won't. And even if everybody did, there'll be none of his own way of thinking exactly. He's bound to feel out of it. Besides, I expect he'll rather look down on us country clergy. We're supposed to be a poor lot you know, take us all round. Very likely he'll preach against us, and our ways."

"I'm pretty certain he won't do that. And after all, there's no difference in what we believe and in what he believes, in essentials."

"Oh, isn't there? You go and talk to Lancing, my boy. He'll tell you of a few points of difference. Lancing will be one of the people who won't want to know Dr. Merrow, and I should think he would cross himself every time he passed him. He was saying the other day that he was bound to do a great deal of harm here, and we ought not to countenance him by so much as recognizing his presence. There's Christianity for you, George! I say, don't you tell Lancing you've been to a service in a dissenting chapel. He'll have a fit."

"I shouldn't want to hide it," said George. "I'm very glad I went, although I didn't care for the service much. I wish we'd got Dr. Merrow in the Church. Why should a man like that be outside?"

"Ah, there you get the other side of the question. I don't know much about Dr. Merrow, but there are plenty of his brethren who would say just the same of us as Lancing says of them; and believe it too. Of course, there *are* differences, even between them and us moderates. Come in and have a cup of tea, George, and have a look at the

garden. I've got a clump of *iris reticulata* out that's a regular sight."

But George excused himself and drove on. He came to his house along the broader road towards Roding. The little town showed up to great advantage from this side, and created a pleasant sense of homeliness and sequestered peace. The pure sky had streaks of primrose in it; the trees which intermingled thickly with the red roofs of the houses were a soft purple; there was the sweetest scent of moist reviving earth; the good-night song of the birds was full of hope for the coming spring. Sense and spirit alike were soothed and gratified. George felt pleased to be at home again; and pleased that his home for the present was at Roding.

His house had been the homestead of a little farm. It was modest enough in appearance, but cosy-looking, with its small-framed windows set in a red tile-hung front, and a latch-gate giving access to a brick-paved walk between flower beds and apple-trees. He had bought the house with its seven acres, and altered it a little inside, as well as rebuilt the stables and pulled down a few of the dilapidated outbuildings.

He drove into the yard and went into the stable to look at his other horse, a clean-boned chestnut rising seven, Irish-bred, for which he had paid rather a big figure at the beginning of the season. The next day was his regular hunting day, and he experienced a quick spurt of pleasure as he thought of it, pulling the cloth aside and running his hand over the closely-clipped coat, while the horse, as if he knew what pleasure was in store for him, whinnied gently and nuzzled him with his soft nose.

He went through the front garden, where a long thick line of yellow crocuses were closing to the last rays of the now setting sun, and into the house. He had taken away the partition between the hall and the larger sitting-room,

into which the front door, covered by a thick curtain, now opened. It was as cosy a bachelor's room as could be seen anywhere. The old wide hearth had been restored, and a great fire of logs was burning upon its bed of swept-up ashes. Two easy chairs stood before it, and an oak stool by one of them, on which there was a little pile of books and papers. But books were not very much in evidence in George's room. There was a book-case that held his modest theological library, and a few novels besides, but it was not full. His writing-table under one of the close-curtained windows had none of the litter that had been seen on Ralph's. A big Bible, a prayer-book and a book of commentaries lay to one side of it, and a diary and some account books on the other. There was a photograph of his father in a silver-frame, and one of the two younger French children, one on either side of Sylvia. There was also a framed list of hunting fixtures. A large silver-mounted blotting-pad had "Sylvia," "Ronald," "Joyce," and "Eddie," inscribed on the four corners, in imitation of the hand-writing of each of them. It had been their Christmas present to him, and Eddie always went to look at it whenever he entered the room, and turned his round head to one side in admiration of his own round hand, thus perpetuated. The pictures on the walls were old coloured prints of battleships, which George's father had collected. In their black and gilt frames they showed up well against the warm red paper. There were gun cases and cartridge boxes in a corner. On the tables were all sorts of objects, chiefly accessory to sport, all laid out in order, for George's man had a passion for tidiness. Piles of the *Field*, the *Guardian*, the *Badminton Magazine*, and *Country Life* were arranged in order of dates. Briar pipes lay in an exact row on the cupboard shelf below the book-case.

The lamps were already lit, and warmed up the red cur-

tains and wall paper and the thick Turkey carpet. This prevailing red gave the room a great air of comfort in the winter. There was a clean smell of wood smoke. If you could have been suddenly set down in this room, you would have known you were in the heart of the country.

This was George's home, and he had become fonder and fonder of it. The bachelor loneliness he might sometimes have felt was done away with by the family life in his cousin's house, which was at all times open to him. He had everything around him that he wanted, and if he should want anything more in the future he could almost certainly have it, for he was not spending more than about a third of his income.

He dined that evening at the rectory. He reached it a quarter of an hour before dinner time, and went up to the nurseries. First he visited Eddie, and presented him with sundry accessories to an elaborate railway plant that he was gradually collecting. Besides some extra yards of railage, which would enable a branch line to be constructed from the station by the fireplace to the goods yard underneath the table, there was a complete apparatus for signalling, in which this particular system had hitherto been weak. Eddie was entranced with his present, and sat up in his little white bed, by special permission of the smiling head-nurse, to play with it "for a few minutes only."

Joyce was calling all the time from another room, and George went in to her. She also was sitting up in bed, her thick mass of dark hair tied back with a blue ribbon, which matched her deep blue eyes. She threw her arms round George's neck, but although her code of manners had led her to the point where she knew better than to ask him what he had brought for her, her eyes rested on the parcel which he had in his hand with undisguised expectation.

It was a small parcel, probably all the more valuable on that account. "Darling old George, you always bring me something lovely when you come home," she said as she hurriedly unpacked it.

It was a frock for Nora, the chief of dolls. Nora's wardrobe stood to Joyce for what his railroad system stood to Eddie. Her stock of clothes was already larger than her necessities demanded, because she suffered a good deal from a great variety of illnesses, and spent much of her time being carefully nursed back to health, only to succumb again almost immediately to whatever disease Joyce had last heard of. It was probable that this new frock, so beautifully made, would do more to arouse her from the state of prostration in which she was at present lying, after a severe operation for meningitis—from which the coachman's child had recently recovered—than the "dressings" administered to her every morning.

"It will be her ball dress," said Joyce, in ecstatic admiration of the dainty fabric of muslin and embroidery. "Of course she is going to the ball next week, if she is well enough, poor dear!"

"She suffers a good deal, doesn't she?" said George.

"It's her constitution," said Joyce imitatively. "I had that trouble with her as a child as you'd never believe."

She kissed and hugged him again in a transport of gratitude. "I couldn't help knowing you would bring me something lovely," she said. "But I like having you back best of all, George. I love you very much, and I wish you were my brother."

"Well, I'm as good as," said George. "And I see you more often than Ralph or Ronald now."

"I know. It was lovely when you came to live here. Eddie said this afternoon that he hoped you would ask us to tea again soon. I told him he mustn't *ask* you to ask

us; but of course we do love going to tea in your dear weeny little house."

"I thought of asking you next Monday. I can't to-morrow, because I'm going to hunt; and I can't on Saturday or Sunday."

"Thank you very much, George. Eddie and I will be delighted to come on Monday, and so will Nora. I'll put it down in her engagement book. George, you'll always go on living here, won't you? You'll always go on living in your dear little house?"

"Well, I don't expect to leave it at present."

"Oh, but you mustn't ever leave it. It would be very sad if you were to go away. Are you going to ride Hannibal to-morrow, or Wickerwork?"

The conversation was carried on with entire absence of strain on either side until Sylvia came in. She looked very pretty in her white evening frock, draped with some tissue in which threads of silver gleamed, her fair hair somewhat elaborately dressed, but in a style that only enhanced the slender delicacy of her face and neck. There was a virginal freshness about Sylvia that would have given charm to a girl of far less beauty, and a frank simplicity of manner that her studied attire only served to point more plainly.

She admired Nora's new frock to an extent that satisfied even Joyce, and laughed at George for having bought it.

"It was quite easy," he said. "There was a nice young woman in the shop who was very much interested in everything I told her about Nora. She helped me choose, or I dare say I shouldn't have got one quite so suitable."

Lady Ruth came into say good-night to the children. She looked wonderfully young, in a gown which showed the slenderness of her figure and the rounded grace of her arms and neck, and she was bright and gay, but motherly too as she tucked Joyce's bed-clothes round her and kissed

her, taking her face in both her hands, and murmuring endearing words to her. She was supposed to spoil her children, and would admit that she was apt to do so. But they were devoted to her, and would do anything she told them. And they were charmingly friendly to strangers, without worrying them.

They went in to say good-night to Eddie. George thought that the pretty, young-looking mother in her smart clothes, and the beautiful children, so sheltered and cherished, made the prettiest picture together. He loved the rectory nurseries, with their air of bright cleanliness, and the innocence and happiness of childhood which seemed to hang about them. They often came to his thoughts when he was alone in his own room.

But there was hardly any aspect of life at Roding Rectory which did not affect him to pleasure, or any of its amenities without value to him. He liked to sit in the Rector's handsomely furnished library and talk to him; he liked the bright flower-laden drawing-room, and the company that was so often gathered there at tea-time or in the evenings; he liked to go up sometimes to Lady Ruth's room, where she and Sylvia were always busy with something, surrounded by their pretty expensive aids to correspondence, or needlework, or household business; he liked the well-served meals in the big dining-room, with the table always beautifully decked, and the trim maids in attendance; and the room which had been the school-room, away from the rest of the house, and looking on to the stables, where he had enjoyed himself as a boy, with his cousins. And the wide spaces of the garden, in which three gardeners were always employed, where every sort of outdoor game was played in the summer in the merriest company, and the terrace and the upper lawns were almost part of the house itself, with all its ground floor windows opening on to them, and seats and tables about

everywhere; the broad, shallow gravel-bottomed river, where the thin waterweeds swayed and the fish had grown almost too cunning to be caught; the hay fields beyond it in which he had spent such glorious June days as a boy; and the stable-yard, of course, with the always desired company of the coachman and the groom, and the smell of the hayloft and the harness-room and the stables themselves, though this pleasure now lay more in retrospect. He had been very happy at Roding Rectory during his long visits of boyhood, and its attractions still held him strongly. They seemed to include everything that could lend to the charm of an English home, and they were all enhanced by the affection with which he was received into the heart of them. His own snug little dwelling-place would have lost half its influence over him if it had not been an appendage, as it were, of this larger house, with all its happy affluent family life.

As Joyce had said, it would be very sad if he were to go away from Roding.

CHAPTER XI

PROBLEMS

SIR RICHARD FRENCH was dining that evening at the Rectory, and Myra Curtis, who was to stay the night and be driven over to her teaching at Farncombe Hall early the next morning.

George's object in going to London was not mentioned, but he told them about his visit to Dr. Merrow's chapel. "I should like to know him when he comes here," he said.

"I haven't told you," said the Rector, "that there is to be a public reception of Dr. Merrow in Roding. Gosset has done me the honour to consult me about it. He wants to take the Moot Hall."

"Very proper," said Sir Richard. "If they ask me I shall take the chair."

The Rector laughed. "There are a few difficulties in the way," he said. "For one thing, Dr. Merrow has asked that there shall be no public reception."

"More proper still," said Sir Richard. "They say he's an invalid and is coming here to recoup."

"I advised Gosset to let him have his own way," said the Rector; "but I regret to say that the advice was not palatable to him. He thinks it would be lacking in respect to such a great man if we did not do something to show that we were proud to welcome him among us."

"I am afraid Mr. Gosset will give the poor man a great deal of trouble," said Lady Ruth. "Why can't he let him come and settle here quietly, and make his friends for himself, like anybody else?"

"Because he's Gosset, my dear. The chapel has to be glorified, even at the expense of Dr. Merrow himself. He thinks he could not object to a tea-meeting, with a few informal speeches of welcome."

"I object to a tea-meeting," said Sir Richard. "As one of the prominent landowners of the neighborhood, my dignity would suffer if I had to sit on a bench and eat buns. I have never done such a thing. I don't object to looking in on a school treat, and patting children's heads. But Dr. Merrow might object if I were to come in and pat his head. Besides, a tea-meeting would spoil my dinner."

"Well, I said much the same, but in other words," said the Rector. "'You won't get the sort of people I suppose you want to come to a tea-meeting,' I said. Gosset was rather cast down. He still clings to the tea-meeting, obviously because he thinks Dr. Merrow could not refuse it. It is part of the regular life that goes on in a small chapel like this. He wants to have a tea-meeting for their own people, and such others as care to come to it, and the rest of us are to be invited to come in afterwards,—I suppose when the cups have been cleared away."

"There would be bound to be a smell of food," said Sir Richard. "If Dr. Merrow is not in the best of health it might upset him. I am against the idea altogether."

"Besides, it would be what Dr. Merrow has said he didn't want," said Lady Ruth. "Didn't you point that out to Mr. Gosset, Henry?"

"Yes, I did. And I pointed out other things to him. I said that I personally would do all I could to show Dr. Merrow I was glad to welcome him here, but that a public meeting of welcome of the sort he proposed, which would be chiefly attended by the nonconformist ministers of the neighbourhood, might arouse some friction. It would be putting us clergy who would be invited to take part in it

in an awkward position. It would be putting a strain upon men who believe in what they teach to have to listen to the expectations that would certainly be expressed of Dr. Merrow's attracting many people to his preaching, and strengthening the nonconformist cause generally. It can only be strengthened hereabouts by drawing people away from the Church; and why should any of us pretend that we should welcome that?"

"Very well put, Henry," said Sir Richard. "But I suppose Gosset didn't see it."

"Oh, no! We are all fellow-labourers in the vineyard, and all that sort of thing. With men like Gosset the fellow-labourer theory comes out very strongly when they want any recognition from us; but if there's any advantage to be gained they treat us as enemies. One always has to keep in mind that there's something at the back of it all. They're not straight."

"Father said he shouldn't go to a public meeting," said Myra Curtis. "He hopes to be friends with Dr. Merrow, but he says that to give him a public welcome would look like supporting a man who had come to work against you in your parish."

"Well, I don't let myself think that he is coming to work against me. The Dissenters have their footing in Roding. They always have had, and they're welcome to it. The place is just big enough to make it natural that there should be differences of opinion. I should be glad, of course, if everybody were to come to church, but I've never advised a single soul to leave them, unless he—or generally she—came to me and showed plainly that they wanted to. Then I've said that I thought ours is the better way. If *they* never did more than that there would be very little trouble between us. There *is* very little trouble in Roding, and I hope there never will be."

"Ah, but you see you've got it all your own way, Henry," said Sir Richard. "Of course they don't like that. Nobody would."

The Rector laughed a trifle vexedly. "I must admit that the whole business is rather a nuisance," he said. "What you 'call having my own way simply means that most people come to church here regularly, as they always have done, and we're not bothered with divisions, which is all the better for us and all the better for them."

"I'm sure they will go on coming to church," said Lady Ruth. "Don't let it worry you, Henry."

"I think they will," said the Rector. "That doesn't worry me in the least. But one can't get away from the feeling that there is an attempt being made to exploit one; and to exploit Dr. Merrow, too. One is anxious to treat him in a friendly and courteous fashion; but that is just what will be made difficult. Myra's father is quite right. He always does take the sensible view. It is one thing to give a man of Merrow's reputation a personal welcome, and quite another to lend yourself to a public endorsement of his work. And, of course, if Curtis refuses to be present—a man of his moderate views—you would hardly expect others to come. Then we shall be said to be slighting Dr. Merrow."

"Or to be jealous of him," suggested Sir Richard. "I quite see that. I think you are right, Henry. Leave the good man to make his own way. Give him a fair field and no favour. Knock this idea of Gosset's on the head."

"I've said what I could; but, if he is determined to have his meeting, I shall go to it. I shall know what to say and do. I am not going to give Gosset a chance of making mischief."

"It all comes back to the sinister Gosset," said Sir Rich-

ard. "I sincerely hope that Dr. Merrow will be strong enough to cope with him."

George spoke for the first time. "I think Dr. Merrow will refuse to have a public meeting at all," he said.

It was not until much later in the evening, when Sir Richard French had driven away, that George told the Rector of what had happened the night before. He said something about the sermon he had heard, but not much. The thoughts it had aroused in him were not yet ripe for expression, and the Rector had said with a smile: "My dear George, let us forget Dr. Merrow for the present. I'm sure he is a good man, and a fine preacher; but just now I feel inclined to talk about somebody else. Now, what about young Gosset?"

"I waited outside for him," said George. "He was with Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, the people he is living with. They went home by train, and he and I walked."

"Did they make any difficulty about your being alone with him?"

"A little. They said they would have to wait up for him. Briggs is a disagreeable sort of man. Poor Percy is very much up against him, and they seem to dislike each other cordially. But Mrs. Briggs seems a nice old thing; and I think she's fond of the boy, and sorry for him."

"How did you get over their objections to your walking home with him?"

"I said I had come up on purpose to see him; and he broke in and said rather rudely that his father had said he might see me and have a talk after the service. Briggs got angry and said the service didn't seem to have done him much good, but he was as unpleasant as he could be himself, and it didn't seem to have done him much good, either. It was an unpleasant scene, especially coming just

after that sermon. The old lady calmed them both down, and Briggs went away telling Percy that he was to come straight home. I don't know whether he thought I wanted to take him off on the loose. He didn't even say good-night to me when he went."

"H'm! Seems a nice sympathetic person to send a boy to to recover himself!"

"Percy says he's at him day and night. He's never allowed to forget he's in disgrace. He finds fault with all his work, and preaches and prays at him every evening. He lets him go for a walk on Sunday afternoons, and that's all the exercise he gets out of doors in the week. On Sundays he's allowed to read nothing but the Bible, and he's sent to a young men's Bible-class twice, besides the two services. He's not allowed to go out, and has to spend what time is left over in his bedroom, as Briggs uses the only parlour they have to go to sleep in. The man's a cross-tempered bully. He's far worse than Gosset, and has the same sort of position in the chapel they go to. Percy says that they all hate him there, but he spends a lot of money on the place and the minister is under his thumb."

"I'm sorry to hear all this, George. I didn't think he was that sort of man, from what Gosset told me. Of course I gathered that he was bigoted and narrow. It's a bad lookout for the boy."

"In one way it's not so bad as if Briggs was a better sort of man. I'm pretty sure Percy couldn't stand the life for long in any case. He's an open-air boy, and ought not to be shut up in a shop at all. He looks much worse in health already. As it is, it's got to come to an end at once. If he hadn't wanted to talk to me first, he would have run away before this. I told him I would get him out of it."

The Rector looked at him with a smile. "I say, George, that's rather a rash promise, isn't it? I don't imagine Gosset

is going to have all his plans upset by a word from you. How are you going to get him out of it? And what are you going to do with him when you've got him out? What does he want to do?"

"He wants to go to Canada. I said I'd help him, if his father wouldn't."

George was sitting back in a deep chair, smoking a cigar, his eyes upon the glowing caves of the fire. The Rector threw a half-quizzical glance at him, and when he had looked at him once he looked at him again. Perhaps he had never looked at him to see what was in his face before. He had taken him very much for granted. As a boy he had been tractable, and, when obedience had been demanded, obedient; as a young man, steady and dependable; since he had worked with him in Roding he had done what had been given him to do, and had done it very well, showing enough initiative within the lines laid down for him, but no desire to strike out lines of his own. In any difficulty he had come to the Rector for advice. But he was not asking for advice now. He had announced an intention.

The Rector's look of slight wonderment turned to something like pride. He knew a man when he saw one, and he saw one in George now, in place of the boy he had never yet quite ceased thinking him. George had been very much like a son to him; he had had a good deal to do with his training, especially of late. He was not nearly so clever as his own sons, not nearly so good-looking. The Rector was more affected than he was aware of by good looks, and if George had actually been his own son he would have thought of him rather as the ugly duckling of the family. But it was a good face that he was looking at now, as if he had never seen it before. The immaturity of youth had left it, a good deal to its advantage; the lines had solidified and given it a look of determination; the mouth,

that had been somewhat indeterminate, had grown firm; the boy's happy eyes had not altogether lost their look, but there were seriousness and purpose behind them.

"Well, George," said the Rector quietly, his mouth set in a curve, "if you've made up your mind, you'll probably get your way. I won't try to stop you. I think it would be a good thing. Gosset won't, though. You may be sure of that."

What Gosset would be likely to think did not seem to be troubling George much at the moment. "There's another thing I want to tell you," he said. "He wants to marry that girl, and take her with him."

The Rector's look altered. "That's a different thing," he said shortly.

George said nothing, but waited for him to speak again.

"We are not at the end of that trouble," he said. "Miss Budd is making mischief. I wish to goodness Merrow would get hold of her when he comes here, and relieve us of her altogether."

"How is she making mischief?" George asked.

The Rector did not answer immediately. "I have always put up with her tiresome ways," he said, "because she did seem to want to make herself useful, and there was a lot that she could do. Besides, she has such a lot of the cat in her that the only thing is to keep her employed, or she'll be getting her claws in all round. I'm afraid she has got them into us at last. She hardly gives me more than a nod when I meet her, and she cut your Cousin Ruth altogether yesterday."

"What on earth did she do that for? She always seemed so anxious to make herself intimate."

"I know. Well, there is a reason for it. She came here a week or two ago to have her say about this painful business, and she said it in such a way as to upset your

cousin considerably, and to arouse me to rebuke her afterwards. I'm very glad I did it. There was no single right thought behind her interference at all. But she evidently took deep offence, and whatever opposition she can raise against us now she will."

"I don't think she has much power. People know her for what she is, pretty well. It is because you and Cousin Ruth have been on friendly terms with her that she has not raised more opposition against herself."

"I think there's something in that. I have smoothed over a good deal that might have caused unpleasantness. But a woman like that, with some money, and a cause behind her which she can persuade herself she is serving, even if she persuades nobody else—she can do a lot of harm."

"What is she doing?"

"She has succeeded in getting hold of Mrs. Morton. She must have taken a great deal of trouble about it, because the woman was dead against her—and quite rightly, too. Morton hates her still, but they seem to be keeping what is happening from him. Mrs. Morton isn't his equal in character, in spite of his rough tongue and irreligious prejudices. It practically comes to this—that Miss Budd must have bribed the woman in some way. At any rate, they are as thick as thieves now, and Mrs. Morton is complaining that we are all in a conspiracy to prevent her daughter being righted, as she calls it, when the boy was quite ready to do it."

There was a pause. "Does Cousin Ruth still go there?" George asked.

Another slight pause. "Yes," said the Rector shortly. Then he shifted his position and spoke more quickly. "I haven't changed my mind on this subject, George," he said. "I still think that such marriages are a mistake, except

in special circumstances. But I shall take no more responsibility about this. Why should I? None of them are our people. Let them settle it amongst themselves. And I would much rather you didn't mix yourself up with it. You say young Gosset wants to marry her. Why? He offered to do so, it's true, when Morton came in that morning and attacked Gosset. But it was as plain as it could possibly be that his eyes had been opened. The girl was nothing to him any more. It was an honest attempt to follow his conscience: nothing more. Why does he want to marry her now? Is it purely conscience, still?"

"Partly. But I think he is fond of her."

The Rector threw out his hand. "Oh, my dear George," he said; "we mustn't let ourselves be blinded. A boy like that—kept shut up like that—he's tasted the fruits once. He wants to do what's right, I know. But isn't he deceiving himself?"

George bent forward and looked more closely into the fire, which seemed to cause his face to redden. "There's a girl in Briggs's shop," he said. "He's afraid of himself."

The Rector frowned. "Confound Briggs's beastly shop!" he said. "What sort of a girl?"

"Not the sort he'd want to marry—or who'd want him to."

The Rector looked into the fire in his turn. "Oh, pack him off to Canada, and give him some honest work to do," he said, with impatience.

George went on in his slow steady way. "He says that the objections that there would be in marrying Jane Morton here wouldn't exist in a new country. She would be the sort of wife that would help him best. He wants to work with his hands and live hard. He wants to forget all about the sort of respectability he's been brought up in, and is living in now. He hates it, and I don't wonder at

it. . . . He is going to be the father of a child. He thinks about that. He says it has had a good deal to do with his keeping straight since he has been in London. He is so unhappy that he wouldn't mind much what he did."

There was a silence. Then the Rector said quietly: "I think I was wrong to say what I did about him just now. George, I can't help being touched by a boy of that age thinking of his fatherhood."

George made no reply, but sat looking into the fire.

The Rector rose from his chair. "Well, my dear boy," he said, "you have put it all in a new light. Perhaps it would be the best thing, after all. I'll think it over. *You* will tackle Gosset about this idea of his going to Canada?"

"Yes, I will. But I don't want to say anything about his marrying."

"No,"—rather unwillingly. "I suppose I must do that when you've had your try. I don't think he'll let him go, you know. What are you actually going to do if he says no?"

"I shall advise Percy to wait till he's twenty-one. It won't be for some months yet. Then I shall give him a start, whatever Gosset says."

"Yes, don't do anything before that. But if he is to marry the girl—! Oh, well, we won't look too far ahead. I'm glad you have taken this poor boy in hand, George. I'm sure he'll be grateful for your friendship."

"He is, poor chap. He hasn't had many friends to help him. I say, shall you want me for anything special to-morrow?"

The Rector put his hand on his shoulder, and laughed. "You go and get a good day with the hounds, my boy," he said. "You deserve it."

CHAPTER XII

THE BALL AND AFTER

THE Ball at Roding Court was long talked of in Meadshire as the most enjoyable that had been given in that county of not-infrequent balls for some time. It is difficult to say exactly what makes the success of such an entertainment. Lavish decoration, which may make a ball in a big London house talked of, plays no part. What flowers there are are usually home-grown, and not cut. The house itself may have something to do with it; but Roding Hall was no show-place; it was only very big. There was actually a ball-room, which is not always found even in large country houses, and there was a very excellent band; also a super-excellent supper, which was the one item that had engaged Sir Richard French's personal and serious attention. But none of these would have made it stand out above other balls.

However, there was no doubt that the guests enjoyed themselves. They came from all the big houses in the county, some of them from as far as the distant parts of West Meadshire, and most of them were in large parties. None of the young women and men who came had ever danced at Roding Hall before, although their mothers and fathers, who kept up such a din of talk and laughter all the time dancing was going on, as well as when it wasn't, might have done so. There was a trifle of novelty in that, for even with no dearth of big houses to provide entertainment, the opening of another one, that had welcomed few guests for a generation, was something of an event.

And Sir Richard French was an admirable host. His long and frequent absences had lent him a slight air of mystery in the eyes of his neighbours, but he greeted all those whom he knew with the utmost cordiality, as if he had seen them last the day before yesterday, and went about when they were all assembled talking to everybody, and as if he expected to see them next the day after to-morrow, and would be glad of the opportunity. He was somewhat old-fashioned in his anxiety to provide partners for those who seemed to be lacking their full share; but he would haul off an astonished young man and make him dance with an unwillingly retiring young girl, with such an authoritative and yet confidential air that his orders seemed almost like flattery; and the girls who, but for him, would have had fewer partners, agreed, if any of them happened to get together, that he was an "old dear." He even danced himself, and his failure to achieve the newer kind of steps was forgiven him for the sake of his affable demeanour and evident enjoyment of all that was going on. Perhaps that had most to do with the success of the ball at Roding Court—that the host evidently enjoyed it so much himself. It was not a formal affair of entertainment with him, but a merry-making, set on foot because he wanted to make merry.

Lady Ruth received the guests with him; and Sylvia, in whose honour the ball was given, stood by her side. She was a radiant figure of youth and beauty, quite as pretty as any girl there, though there was no lack of pretty girls. Her sparkling air of enjoyment added to the charm of her sweet simplicity, to which Miss Budd had taken exception as being more in accordance with her rectorial home than her aristocratic birth; and she was gowned in a way that spoke of Paris, and Paris in its happiest and most adjustable mood.

Miss Budd would have had little to complain of, from her point of view, in Sylvia's appearance and demeanour, although she might have thought it unnecessary, on that occasion, for her to waste dances over her friends amongst the sons of the clergy and of the lesser squires, when there was so much rank and fashion ready to besiege her. But Miss Budd was not among the guests. She had retired to bed with a sharp attack of spite, which she called lumbago, and had deputed Mrs. Stenning to keep her eyes open and tell her all that had happened, afterwards.

Mrs. Stenning, a sharp-faced figure in a black gown, had sought out a corner in which she could see as much as possible of what was going on, and herself be seen as little as possible. She felt that if she could only be allowed to stay there all the evening without being taken any notice of she might possibly enjoy herself; although she could not help wondering whether Alice would lock all the doors and sit within hearing of the children, as she had promised to do, or enjoy herself surreptitiously with the butcher's young man, which she had promised not to do; and she couldn't help thinking that her black frock did look rather dowdy compared with all the smart ones, and if she had known it was going to be so very grand as this she would have taken resolution to buy a new one.

But Sir Richard French had sought her out, peering above the heads of seated dowagers in her corner, and had led her out to take refreshment. She was flustered by the attention almost to tears, but he had talked so agreeably and so naturally that her shrinkings vanished, and the glass of champagne he brought her did her so much good that she was disposed towards the idea that an occasion of this sort might be enjoyable on its own account, and not merely vicariously. Afterwards, she sat for a time with Mr. and Mrs. Curtis; and Sylvia, looking lovely, and accompanied

by a very smart young man in a pink coat, actually stopped and said a few words to her on her way towards palms and fountains. Ronald French took her in to supper, which had been something of a nightmare to her in anticipation; for she had had horrible pictures in her mind of herself sitting alone in her black gown, that was only passable if partly hidden by others, in a room gradually emptying, and possibly of Sir Richard French coming in, seeing her forlorn state and deputing an unwilling stranger to attend to her wants, which would be worse than going without supper altogether; though at her age she *wanted* something, when she sat up till two or three o'clock in the morning.

How Ronald French had got himself to Roding Court in the middle of term-time need not be enquired into too closely. At any rate, he was enjoying himself hugely, had no difficulty in securing partners from amongst the prettiest girls in the room, and was apparently completely successful in amusing them. Lest his choice of Mrs. Stenning as a supper-partner should be regarded as a mere unnatural act of self-sacrifice, it may be said that she was not his only one. He was in high spirits, and made himself very amusing, causing her to laugh more freely than she would have thought possible in such surroundings. They *were* nice, these young rectory Frenches, made everybody feel at home, and neglected nobody, not even the people who would have thought a measure of neglect not unnatural, when they were out of their rectory sphere.

Mrs. Stenning expatiated gracefully on their niceness to Miss Budd afterwards, and said that she had really enjoyed the ball, although she would have been glad enough not to have to go. Miss Budd, with pursed lips, agreed that they were nice, on the whole; though it was a wonder that they should be, considering the high and mighty airs that their parents gave themselves.

Miss Budd's attitude towards the Rector and Lady Ruth was a puzzle to Mrs. Stenning at this time. She was not remarkable for seeing into things, or persons, but even she found it difficult to swallow the statement that Miss Budd had made to her, that their attitude towards this disgraceful affair of young Gosset and Jane Morton was so unlike what that of good church people ought to be that she had felt obliged to tell them so, and at present they were not very good friends in consequence, and the less she saw of them for a time the better she should be pleased. Of course, Miss Budd being so much "in with the grandes," would not hesitate to speak her mind plainly, if she saw occasion to differ from any one of them, as she had reported herself to have done. But the vinegary speeches she did not seem to be able to hold herself from making about the Rector and his wife, whenever their names were mentioned, did not quite accord with her professed attitude of high-minded sorrow on account of their temporary obliquity. Mrs. Stenning was beginning to suspect that more lay behind the undoubted estrangement than Miss Budd had told her, and that Lady Ruth, if it had been within the bounds of possibility that she should tell her her side of the story, would have told a different one. But she thought it was all bound to come right by-and-by, and did her own mild best to smooth things over by putting the much-admired rectory people before her friend in the most agreeable light, little thinking that by so doing she was making it difficult for Miss Budd to keep her temper.

"Oh, but you couldn't say that Lady Ruth was high and mighty last night," she said. "I haven't told you—I went in, after I'd put myself tidy, behind a very grand-looking elderly lady, with a lot of young ladies all very smartly dressed and some aristocratic-looking gentlemen. I hadn't an *idea* who they were, and to my surprise she was

announced as the Duchess of Pevensey; and they with all sorts of other titles which I've forgotten. And when Lady Ruth had said 'How do you do,' to them—it was 'Dr. and Mrs. Stenning.' Rather a come-down, eh? Well, I assure you she seemed more pleased to see me than the Duchess. Nobody was behind us for the moment, and she asked me how Charlie was, and said she was so glad I was able to leave him and come there. Oh, no, Miss Budd! *Quite* the great lady, and *exquisitely* dressed; but *not* high and mighty; by no means."

"Oh, well," said Miss Budd, with some ill-nature. "After spending an evening in company with Duchesses, of course you know a good deal more about behaviour than I do. I suppose the Rector went about with his nose in the air, looking as if he thought himself an archbishop at the least."

"Indeed, no such thing, Miss Budd," said Mrs. Stenning, with a touch of offence. "He made a very fine figure of a man, as he always does; but he was most genial, and seemed to be laughing and talking with people the whole evening. I'm sure it did a person good to look at him. I must say I *am* rather surprised, Miss Budd, that you always seem anxious now to run the Rector and Lady Ruth down, even if you *have* had a tiff with them. You know what high society manners are as well as anybody, and church or no church, and young Gosset and Jane Morton or *no* young Gosset and Jane Morton, you must know that the Rector and Lady Ruth would behave perfectly."

The good lady had never dared to go so far in criticism of her friend before, but with loyalties in the balance an implied rebuke of Miss Budd was better than an acquiescence in her belittling of the Frenches. Miss Budd was annoyed at it, but bethought herself that she had better not allow her spite to become too apparent, or this admiring

friend might depose her from the pinnacle upon which she had placed her.

"Oh, well," she said grudgingly, "I am annoyed with them, and that's a fact. But I dare say they would behave properly, surrounded by all those people. I suppose *all* the clergy were there, with all their wives and daughters and sons."

"Oh, yes; everybody was there from all round. I really felt that I was amongst friends, in spite of the grandees, and I've never felt like that before in a house like Roding Court. Of course *you* would have had more friends still. I do think it is such a pity that your lumbago got so bad at the last moment. You *would* have enjoyed it so. You would have been quite in your element."

Miss Budd, exasperated anew at having been left out when all the rectories and vicarages and surgeries in the neighbourhood had poured themselves into Roding Hall, had a strong inclination to vent her spleen by telling Mrs. Stenning the truth—that, with everybody invited who could put an evening coat or gown on their backs, *she* hadn't been considered good enough; and was it surprising that she should not be feeling particularly cordial towards Lady Ruth, who had sent out the invitations, or even to Sylvia, who must have known that she had been left out? If she had said so at the beginning, she knew that Mrs. Stenning would have expressed the most unbounded surprise and condemnation, and sided with her whole-heartedly. But it was too late now.

"If I had really wanted to go," she said, "I might have risked it. But these affairs to which everybody is invited aren't much in my line now, although, of course, I should have enjoyed it as a girl for the sake of the dancing. I would rather see my friends quietly. I felt quite *pleased* I hadn't gone when I heard the carriages come home, and was comfortably tucked up in my bed-clothes."

This was a smashing lie, for when she had been awakened by the carriages driving home very late beneath her windows, she had had such an access of spite at the remembrance of her wrongs that her whole body had shaken with it. Did she remember this when she confessed her sins in detail before going to the early service next Sunday, as was her habitual custom? Probably not. She would have liked to feel pleased that she had not gone to the ball, and no doubt took the wish for the deed.

"I told Sir Richard French how unwell you were," said Mrs. Stenning, innocently. "I said you would be very sorry not to be there. I suppose you don't mind my having said that?"

"What did he say?" asked Miss Budd, with a look of alarm, which she tried to disguise.

"He said that he was very sorry to hear you were unwell, but he was sure that if you had really wanted to come my husband would have put you right. You know his nice way, Miss Budd—compliments all round. My husband was quite pleased when I told him."

Miss Budd did not hear the latter part of the speech. Then it was as she had half suspected. Sir Richard had taken it for granted that she would be there, and it was Lady Ruth who had taken it upon herself to leave her out. It had been just possible that, as the invitations had been sent out in Sir Richard's name, there had been a slight difficulty—so she had thought—in sending one to an unmarried lady on whom he had never actually 'called,' although he knew about her well enough. But Mrs. Stenning's statement disposed of that possibility. He had taken it for granted that she would be asked, had very likely said that she was to be. And Lady Ruth had left her out. Very well! Now she knew.

"I haven't told you about Lord Pangbourne yet," Mrs.

Stenning was saying, when she came out of her dark reverie. "Of course, you may imagine, after what you told me, that I kept my eyes open for him. I was rather clever about it. I asked Ronald to point me out *all* the people with titles while we were at supper, and, when he took me back to the ball-room afterwards, I said, 'I know I'm an awful snob, but I do like knowing whether people have got titles or not, and I've never been in a room with so many before, and I don't suppose I ever shall again.' Of course he went on with a lot of his nonsense, and made up a lot of names that I knew couldn't belong to anybody, although I'm bound to say I believed him just at first, until he pointed to the Duchess of Pevensey, whom I *did* know—I mean by sight—and said, 'That's the Baroness von Hook-nosen. She was a Miss Sniff before she married the Baron.' Ronald is a very amusing boy, and clever and nice manners besides, and of course I didn't mind his fun a bit."

"I think it was very impertinent of him," said Miss Budd. "I should have given him a good snubbing if I had been in your place."

"Oh, I don't know! Boys will be boys. But I saw a very tall distinguished-looking man coming in with Lady Ruth, and I said: 'Now, who is that with Lady Ruth? I'm sure *he* looks as if he had a title.' He said: 'Yes, you're quite right, Mrs. Stenning. He's the Earl of Boulter's Lock; at least, it isn't quite that, but it has something to do with the river.' So I said, 'You don't mean to tell me that's Lord Pangbourne!' and he said: 'Yes, that's it. Why, you know them better than I do; I shan't tell you any more.'"

"I hope you didn't give Ronald to understand that you had any particular reason for asking the question?"

"Oh, Miss Budd, as if I would, after what you had told me! Of course, Ronald thought I knew about him because

he is in the Government. And I'm quite sure that *he* suspects nothing—Ronald, I mean—nothing between Lord Pangbourne and Sylvia.”

“I suppose not. They would hardly talk about it until they had succeeded in hooking him.”

Even to Mrs. Stenning this sounded vulgar, as well as offensive, and she paused in her flow of information with a look of distrust on her face.

“I don't think you would have said that there was anything of that sort if you had been there,” she said, in a tone that was more aloof than any she had ever used towards Miss Budd, and there stopped.

“Well, go on,” said Miss Budd. “What happened?”

“I was going to tell you that—but really! Miss Budd, I simply can't go on talking about people I respect and like, and who have been kind and considerate to me, without *fail*, and people you always seemed to have the same ideas of as I have, if you continue to——”

“Oh, good gracious!” interrupted Miss Budd tartly, and was about to vent her spleen upon Mrs. Stenning for presuming to remonstrate with her over her behaviour, when she bethought herself once more.

“Well, there, if it offends your delicacy,” she said, “I'll keep what I think to myself. You must remember that I have known these people a good deal longer than you have, and know what goes on in their circles in a way that you can't.”

“Oh, yes, I know that,” Mrs. Stenning made haste to reply, eager to catch at anything whereby she could preserve friendship by belittling herself. “You're in a far better position to judge of things than I am—naturally—you being what you are and I being what I am. But really, it does pain me to hear people—I won't presume to call them friends, though they do act like friends, and I don't

believe they would mind—who are always so *nice* to me—what shall I say?—run down. But I don't believe you mean it, Miss Budd. You're naturally so kind-hearted. I know you're not well, and very sorry I am for it, and I put it down to that. So I'll say no more. Well, now, I'll tell you all that happened. Really, it was as good as a play for *me* to watch, and I can tell you I kept my eyes open. Lord Pangbourne paid a good deal of court to Lady Ruth, and at one time he was standing up for quite a long time talking to the Rector, and very good friends they seemed to be, though nothing *more* than that, you must understand—I mean in the way of their treating him *specially*."

"Well, that's enough about them," said Miss Budd. "What about Sylvia? That's what I want to know."

"I am going to tell you. As regards him I've no doubt about it—no doubt at all. It's plain as the nose on your face."

The nose on Miss Budd's face was more than usually plain, which may have accounted for the asperity with which she said: "No doubt about what? If anything happened, do, for goodness' sake, tell me what it was."

"Oh, happened! I didn't say that I saw anything happen. What I did notice—and I expect my lord would be rather surprised if he knew how closely he was watched by a person in a shabby dress who got into a corner and kept her eyes open—was that *his* eyes were fixed on Sylvia whenever they were in the ball-room together, even when he was talking to people. 'Ah!' I said to myself, 'you're a great man, my lord, and I'm only a country doctor's wife, but there's no mistaking *that* look. I know your secret, as well as if you'd come and told it to me. You're in love with our pretty Sylvia, and pretty deep in, too.'"

"Yes, I've gathered as much as that from what friends

have told me," said Miss Budd, whose one source of information about this affair had been an impertinent paragraph in a scavenging society paper, which was sent to her regularly by post. "There's no doubt he's smitten with her. But that's a very different thing from marriage."

"I don't know so much about that," said Mrs. Stenning. "If you'd seen his eyes. If you'd——"

"I know you don't know much about it," Miss Budd interrupted her, "and I do know something about it. A man in that position doesn't offer marriage to every girl he is smitten with. If you've nothing more to tell me than that he followed her about with his eyes—well, I know that already. Did he dance with her? Did they sit out together?"

"He danced with her twice," said Mrs. Stenning, rather cast down by the reception of her news, and inclined to question it. "I don't know about sitting out. But I'll say this, that lord or no lord, if that look didn't mean marriage, or anyhow, his *wanting* marriage, then he's not the fine gentleman he looks, and I, for one, don't want him for our pretty Sylvia."

"It won't make much difference whether you want him or not," said Miss Budd, still under the blighting influence of her attack of lumbago. "I don't say he *isn't* contemplating marriage, and never have said it—I know too much. But I shall be surprised if anything happened last night, or *will* happen because of this ball that everybody seems to have gone mad about."

Nevertheless, something *had* happened on the previous evening. Lord Pangbourne, who was an Under-Secretary of State, and a rising light in the political world, as well as a light long since risen in the social, had asked the Rector of Roding if he might call on him on the following morning.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO DISCUSSIONS

THERE was not much opportunity or privacy for the discussion of momentous questions at Roding Rectory at that particular time, for the house was full to overflowing with a lively party whose talk and laughter were heard all over it, and subsided only when its occupants retired to their several beds. Even the Rector had given up his dressing-room, and Joyce and Eddie were delighted with the company of two girl cousins, for whom the day nursery had been turned into a bedroom.

The Rector told his wife of Lord Pangbourne's request for an interview when they at last found themselves alone together, hardly before daybreak, after the ball.

"I could see that it was bound to come," she said. "I suppose *he* will want to speak to Sylvia."

"I think you ought to prepare her. *Is* she prepared? Does she know what is coming?"

"Not from anything he has said to-night, I feel sure. Henry, I suppose you *must* let him ask her?"

He looked at her a little surprised. "Don't you want me to?" he asked. "We haven't talked about it much, but surely you were prepared for its coming at any time, from what Alice told you—Sylvia, too."

"Sylvia has never said anything, except that he was always very nice to her. She told me about him just as she tells me about every one she meets in London, and going about. I doubt if it has ever struck her that he is in love with her, as I suppose he is. He is so much older; she

was rather flattered at his taking notice of her. Darling Sylvia—she always thinks it the most extraordinary thing if anybody seems to like her.”

“My dear child, what are you driving at?” he asked with an affectionate smile. “You have seen that this was likely to come. Don’t you want it, now that it is here?”

“Dear Henry, do you? I don’t know what we should do without Sylvia. It seems only yesterday that she was a little child. In some ways she is hardly more than a child now.”

“I know,” he said indulgently. “Of course you will feel losing her. So shall I—very much indeed. I felt like that when Pangbourne asked me if he might come and see me, knowing what he meant. I didn’t feel glad at all—really sorry. Still, we know it has to come, some day or other. I can’t help wondering it hasn’t come before. Unless I’m blinded by fatherly pride, Sylvia was far the most beautiful girl there to-night, and she’s good and sweet all through. My dear, you’ve given me a daughter to be very proud of, and you’ve kept her unspotted from the world.”

“Dearest Henry, I wish I could keep her so a little longer. There are so many sad things she must know when she goes away from us. Poor Lord Pangbourne—I know he isn’t to blame, I have always been very sorry for him. But his history—Sylvia must know that.”

He looked serious. “It is a drawback,” he said. “I don’t like to think of it in connection with Sylvia. Still, he has a full right to marry again, and to marry a good and innocent girl, too. He has done nothing to forfeit that right, and neither of us would have a word to say, or feel that it was in any way unsuitable, if it were any other girl except our own. He is young still; he has the best part of his life before him.”

"Not really young; thirty-five."

"Well—not a boy, of course. But thirty-five is young, with a man like that."

"Yes, to you and me. Not to a girl of twenty. I do really think that Sylvia will be absolutely surprised that he should be thinking of marrying her, and that we should think it possible."

"You really think that?"

"Yes, I do. If she had had the least idea of it, I am sure I should have known."

He considered this. "One can't prevent his putting his question, now," he said. "And Sylvia must be prepared for it."

"Oh, yes! I must tell her to-morrow morning. But supposing— Oh, Henry, is it quite necessary that he should see her to-morrow? I think I know so well what will happen. She will be a little frightened—almost shocked. She won't accept him—to-morrow; she couldn't, I know."

"What do you suggest then?"

"She will see him again. He will have many opportunities of meeting her, when she goes to Alice after Easter. She will know what is in his mind, she will get used to it. Let him make his own way with her."

"Well," he said slowly. "I know that you are likely to be right about her. If she is absolutely unprepared—and I don't know that I could wish her to be anything else—of course she can't give him an answer to-morrow—at least not the answer he wants. But I can't help saying that I hope it may come right for him, Ruth. As for his place in the world—that's as it happens to come. It wouldn't weigh with me, nor of course with you, as against other things, but there's no sense in denying that it counts to some extent. He's what you'd call an excellent match. The sort of fellow he is, apart from all that, is what mat-

ters, and to my mind he more than passes any test you could put him to. Don't you feel that yourself, from what you have seen of him? Don't you like him—very much?"

"Oh, yes, I do like him," she made haste to reply. "But Sylvia! Oh, Henry, if he were ten years younger, and hadn't been married before!"

He took her face between his hands and kissed her, smiling tenderly at her. "You want a love affair for her," he said. "I'll leave it all to you. You'll know what to do and say."

* * * * *

"Oh, but, mother darling, I couldn't. He's so old."

Lady Ruth had managed to get Sylvia alone after the late breakfast next morning. Sylvia's eyes were full of wonder, of a sort that made her mother feel as if she had unwillingly hurt her. It is to be doubted whether Lord Pangbourne would have been quite satisfied with the way in which his suit was prepared for him. Lady Ruth's last speech before she and Sylvia left her room together was: "Well, darling, he will say nothing yet; you needn't be afraid. I was bound to tell you, though I hated doing it. Father will see him, and you needn't think anything more of it till you go up to London."

* * * * *

It was on this morning that George Barton had arranged to see Gosset. He arose at his usual hour, and at eight o'clock read matins in the church, empty except for himself and the sexton, who had rung the bell. At about half-past nine he went to Gosset's shop and was shown into the private office.

Gosset came in and greeted him with a slight air of patronage. George was a curate, and there is that about the very word curate which strikes the man of Gosset's

way of thinking as something inglorious and rather absurd. In the case of George, who was known not to be dependent upon his curate's stipend, and whose pursuits differentiated him in some degree from the average curate, the feeling was not so strong as it might have been in the case of a young man, however learned or devoted, who neither hunted nor shot, and lived in two rooms; but it was there, all the same.

To Mr. Gosset, George was "the curate," and rather less likely on that account to be versed in matters of religion than any of the chapel-going young men in this shop.

"Well, Mr. Barton, sir, what can I do for you?" asked Gosset, rubbing his hands together.

"I came to talk to you about Percy," said George. "I saw him last week, you know. I haven't been able to come and see you before."

Gosset had different kinds of armour with which to repel the shafts that still raked him over his son's disgrace. With his co-religionists he was the stricken father, prayerfully resigned; to his non-worldly associates, who commiserated with him, not without an idea of unsettling him on the pinnacle to which he had exalted himself, he was the man with his eyes open, upright and straightforward, but not to be imposed upon; to Morton, who never let a chance meeting pass without some rough, jaunty, or contemptuous speech, he was the hard business man, unassailable by impertinence; to the Rector he was something of all these characters. But to George—the curate—he was not going to admit any grounds of equality whatever. What he had done he had done; what he should do he would do. George had made a friend of his son, who was in the deepest disgrace. That being the case, he must even be prepared to share a little of the opprobrium that his son had earned. Certainly, he would not be accepted as an adviser, or as

one who had any right to offer advice. A pretty thing, indeed, if a man of Gosset's religious experience were to have his actions and intentions questioned by a curate!

He did not ask George to sit down. "Well," he said, "I hope you found him in a better frame of mind. I'm not satisfied with the way he is taking things. I wasn't very anxious that you should see him, because—to speak plainly to you, Mr. Barton—I regard much of what goes on here amongst the lads as only drawing them away from more serious things, and if Percy hadn't been led to think more of amusing himself than of his duty to God and his parents, this terrible thing would not have happened. Still, you're a young man who professes to have given himself to the service of God, and you wouldn't have said anything that would be likely to upset him further. He's discontented, I know, and says he's unhappy. He *ought* to be unhappy, but not because he is where he can't get opportunities for playing games and amusing himself generally."

"He is so unhappy," said George, "that it is impossible for him to go on living in the surroundings in which you have placed him."

Gosset's face showed temper. He turned round and took a chair. "We'd better sit down," he said. "If that's the sort of thing you have come to say, we'll have it out together, you and I, once for all, Mr. Barton."

"I came to talk it over with you, Mr. Gosset," said George. "I have a suggestion to make."

"Understand then, please," said Gosset in a hard dictatorial voice, leaning forward and looking at him disagreeably, "that I'm not prepared to listen to suggestions from you, Mr. Barton; and what's more, I consider it great presumption on your part to come here and offer them. I'm not accountable for my actions to the curate of Roding, or the curate of any other place. I've talked things over

with Mr. French, as man to man, not because he is Rector here, or has any authority to interfere in my affairs in any way, but simply because he was mixed up in them, as anybody else might have been. That's a very different thing to having a young gentleman who happened to put on a white tie a few months ago coming in and presuming to dictate to me, and I'm not going to put up with it for a moment."

George was silent.

"I hope you quite understand that," said Gosset, with a trifle less of truculence.

"I understand," said George, "that you are not likely to listen to anything I have to say before you have worked off your ill-will against what I represent."

"Ill-will!" replied Gosset, contemptuously, his rancour reviving. "And what you represent! Allow me to tell you, Mr. Barton, that all the curates in the kingdom might come and talk to me, and I should think no more of them than any other young gentleman, who have just enough sense to pass an easy examination, and put themselves in a position where they would have slippers and braces worked for them. The whole thing's contemptible. There isn't an ounce of true religion in it. I 'ate the 'ole business."

"I know you do," said George. "It is what I said."

"Very well then," said Gosset, skilfully leaving this point, "and now there's another thing. I said just now that I thought you wouldn't so far forget yourself as to disturb Percy in his mind, now that I've put him in surroundings where he'll be able to live a good life and repent of his sin if he's let alone to himself and the good influences he's got round him. I thought as a gentleman you wouldn't do that, and I gave my permission for you to see him on that understanding. Seems now I was wrong, and you've gone behind my back and are trying to undo what I've

done. Very well, then. I won't trust you any more, Mr. Barton. I've had my lesson. And that's all I've got to say to you. Now, as I'm busy, I'll be getting back to my work."

He rose. George kept his seat. "I told you just now," he said, "that it was impossible for him to go on living where he is. He refuses to do it. I have persuaded him to stay where he is and take no steps until I have seen you on his behalf."

Gosset took his seat again. "And you back him up!" he said angrily. "You make him still more dissatisfied, and then come here calmly and expect me to talk it over with you, as if you were a man of my own standing at least, and I was going to accept *your* advice as to how I ought to treat my own son. It seems to me, Mr. Barton, that you're no better than he is. You're two young men together who set themselves against their elders, and'll have to be kept in their places. Percy will stop where is, and you'll kindly oblige me by not interfering with him any further. You keep to your own line, and amuse yourself with your balls and your horse-riding, and your intoning, and all the rest of it, and leave me to manage my own affairs in my own way."

"Percy wants to go to Canada," said George, "and work on the land. He is miserable, shut up in London. He loves the open-air, and is young and strong. He will make his way in a new country, and I have friends there who will help him."

A change came over Gosset's face. He was no fool; he knew well enough that his son was getting beyond his control. He had never been as amenable as he ought to have been, and since his disgrace he had seemed to be deliberately setting his face against the doctrines and assumptions he had accepted before. Gosset put that down largely,

to George's influence over him, though entirely without reason; but the fact remained that he was losing his own hold over him, and knew it. He had even thought of sending him out of the country himself. With his permanent removal, a good deal of the annoyance he suffered on his behalf would also be removed; he had other boys who could succeed to his business; poor Percy was coming to be regarded as the irreclaimable black sheep of the family.

But it would cost more money than he was willing to spend, if he were to do it in such a way as not to appear to be casting him off; it would confirm the accusation brought against him that all he was anxious for was to keep Percy out of Roding; and it would lessen the effect of punishment, which, for all his talk of regeneration, was never out of his mind in keeping him where he was. By-and-by, perhaps, it might be thought of—Australia, South Africa, Canada—but not yet.

But he was far from being willing to admit this to George.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he exclaimed. "He wants to run away; and you and he have been talking it over together."

"Yes, we have been talking it over together," said George. "And now I should like to talk it over with you. It is quite true that he has wanted to run away; and as I have already told you, I have stopped that for the present."

George's quietness of speech, and his steady refusal to be turned from his point, or to take offence at what had amounted to insults on Gosset's part, were beginning to have their effect. Gosset saw in him, not "the curate" any longer, but the gentleman, known to be of good birth and reputed to be wealthy, the "good customer," to whom respect is legitimately owing, if he does nothing to forfeit it.

The quiet passing by of offensive speeches as if entirely beneath his notice, rebuked them more effectively than if he had replied to them, with whatever dignity. Gosset changed his tone, into one in which a spice of the subservience of the tradesman entered.

"Well, Mr. Barton," he said. "I dare say I've spoken my mind rather more freely than was altogether becoming from me to you. You'll recognize that I'm bound to stand up against religious aggression if I see any signs of it; but you'll make allowances for that, I know."

George made no reply. This was no apology; and the offence was not to be excused, though it could be ignored. Gosset felt that he had made a blunder. He had tried to hector "the curate"; he had only exhibited vulgarity to the "good customer," who was on a plane so far removed from his as to consider the vulgarity only natural in a tradesman, and not worth even resenting.

"Of course, if you come to me simply as a gentleman who takes an interest in my son, I'm quite ready to hear what you have to say, and can thank you for being so kind. We're not likely to agree on a good many points, but if you say that the boy has been wicked enough to think of running away, and you have prevented him, then I ought not to have said what I did just now, and I hope you will forget it."

This came nearer to an apology, but George still passed it by. "A friend of mine has a big farm in Alberta," he said. "I will write to him if you will give me permission. I am sure he will be glad to give Percy a start, and from what I have heard there will be no difficulty about his making his way, with the strength and the keenness that he has. He would cost you nothing after he got there. There would only be his passage and his outfit."

"Come now, Mr. Barton," said Gosset, with a smile.

"That's going a bit too quickly. I never said I had any intention of sending Percy to Canada. I haven't. It's quite a new idea to me. All I say to you is that I'm grateful for your preventing him taking a foolish, wicked course. What'd his mother say, if he was to do a thing like that, let alone me, who have done my best all his life to train him up to be the steady God-fearing young man I looked forward to his being? He ought not to be thinking of things like this. If he was truly repentant for the wrong he's done, and wanted to get back to a state of happiness, he would take his life now in a very different spirit. He is in helpful surroundings. I've given him every chance. I know what's good for him much better than he does, and if you'll forgive me saying so—not running you down in any way—better than you can, at your age. What I'll do is to go up and see him and have a talk to him. Of course he misses his home; that's only natural. If he behaves himself, he shall come home, perhaps over Whitsuntide. I don't want to be hard on the boy, though he's brought sad trouble on us."

"Mr. Gosset," said George, as quietly as ever, "Percy will be twenty-one this summer, and his own master. If you don't see your way to helping him now to get out of his unhappy surroundings and give him a fresh start, I have advised him to wait until then. But he won't wait longer."

"Oh!" said Gosset with a slight return to his aggressive manner. "I'm to have a pistol put to my head, am I? And supposing I say 'No,' Mr. Barton? I'm not ready at a moment's notice to send my son to the other side of the world—why you know—you must see yourself—that it's absurd to come and throw a thing like that at my head, and expect me say yes at once. Things can't be done in that way."

"No. I didn't expect you to say 'Yes' at once. I only wanted to talk to you about it, and get you to think it over."

"You tell me he's going, sooner or later, whether I give my consent or not."

"I told you that after I understood you to have refused to consider the idea."

"Well, it comes to the same thing. Whether I consider it or not, you and he have taken the matter into your own hands. Whatever I say, he's going, you tell me. How is he going, I should like to know, if he does wait till he's his own master, as you put it! He hasn't got a penny but what I give him. He'll be no more his own master when he's twenty-one than he is now."

"He would be quite ready to work his passage; and when he once got over there he would have no difficulty in making a living. Mr. Gosset, the boy is desperate; he's ready for anything. I don't come here to hold a pistol to your head, as you say. I have done you a service in persuading him not to cut himself off from you. But I should be doing you no service if I didn't let you know that the situation is serious. Isn't this a way out of it all? The idea is sudden to you, of course, and it would be absurd to expect you to make up your mind to it on the spot. There's no necessity for that. But it's for you to decide, after what I have told you, whether it isn't worth thinking over seriously."

Gosset had been thinking during this speech. There was a look of slyness on his face as he said: "It seems to me, Mr. Barton, that you are taking a good deal of responsibility on your shoulders. It doesn't seem to strike you that the man who pays the piper has some sort of right to call the tune. You call the tune, but if you had to pay the piper you might call a different one."

"I am quite ready," said George, "if you give your approval, to do everything that is necessary for sending Percy to Canada, and giving him a start when he gets there. I haven't said so before, because I didn't know how such a proposal would strike you. It is made out of friendship to Percy. If you will consent to it, you will give me genuine pleasure."

"Thank you, Mr. Barton; it's very good of you," said Gosset, speaking as if he had come to a decision, and now knew where he stood; "but of course I couldn't consent to anything of the sort. I'm responsible for my son and I must be left to do what I think fit for him."

He stood up. George looked puzzled. Surely, this was not to be the end of the interview! He rose slowly. "Then you will think over it," he said.

"No," said Gosset. "I'm obliged to you for the trouble you've taken, Mr. Barton, but as I say I'm going to do what I think best. Percy isn't going to Canada, or anywhere else. He's going to stop where he is, and behave himself."

"I've told you," said George, searching in his rather slow mind for a reason for Gosset's new decision of manner, "I've told you that he has already made up his mind."

"Then he'd better unmake it again," said Gosset.

George was thoughtful for a moment; Gosset stood waiting for him to speak. He raised his eyes to Gosset's face. "Aren't you making a mistake?" he said. "What am I to write to him? In a way, I'm his ambassador, you know."

"You can say what you please, Mr. Barton." Gosset's speeches came readily, inviting others.

"Then I'm to tell him I have failed? You won't listen to him."

"I certainly won't take him away from where he is and send him to Canada, or anywhere else."

"I have told you that if you refuse to listen to him, he will take matters into his own hands."

Was this what Gosset wanted? His reply came almost in a tone of triumph. "Then I wash my hands of him," he said. "I don't care what he does, or what you or anybody else do, Mr. Barton. My authority is scouted, and Percy ceases to be a son of mine. I'll have nothing more to do with him. He needn't wait till he's twenty-one; he needn't wait another month, or another week. Unless he does what I bid him, I've done with him, and done with him for good. You can tell him that if you want to know what to tell him."

George took up his hat from the table. "Very well, Mr. Gosset," he said. "I think I understand you now. There's no necessity for anything more between us."

He was going out. Gosset looked at him sharply. "I've nothing against you, Mr. Barton," he said. "But I don't think quite as you do about Percy, and you had better leave it to me. He won't want to go to Canada when I've talked to him."

George turned to him quickly. "Are you still meaning to go up and see him?" he asked.

Gosset's eyes dropped involuntarily. "I can't go this week," he said, "I've too many engagements. But, yes; I certainly intend to go up and see him."

"Do you want me not to write till you have talked things over with him?"

"Oh, of course you'll please yourself about that, Mr. Barton. But I mean what I say. If Percy flaunts my authority and takes his own line, I've done with him. I think we understand each other."

"I think we do," said George, and went out.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ARRIVAL

DR. MERROW came to Roding shortly after Easter. "The Limes," restored and re-decorated from top to bottom, well-furnished and generally trimmed up as to all its immediate surroundings, was attractive enough as a country residence in those mild still days of early spring. The various people who made half-surreptitious entries into it, chiefly on the invitation of Gosset, who took a sort of proprietary interest in what was going on there, were apt to wonder why it had never found a tenant before. With its high ceilings, large plate-glass windows, and "'andsome portico," it struck them as a most desirable type of residence—much more so than if it had been a rambling, two-storied house nestling amongst trees, in a large garden of which you could not have seen the limits at a single glance. The garden of "The Limes" was a fenced-in oblong, with a lawn down the middle, a gravel path running round it, a flower-bed running round that, and shrubs behind it. The lawn had been cut and the gravel re-laid, and the shrubs pruned.

No flowers had yet been planted, but a few groups of daffodils bristled in the dug-up borders, and a few hardy plants were showing signs of gratitude at treatment received by throwing up strong clumps of leafage. It was all beautifully "tidy," and aroused commendation from the self-invited visitors. "A man one day a week 'd keep that in order. He wouldn't have much more to do sometimes than keep the leaves swept up. If it wasn't for the name of the place I should have those trees down."

Two fine limes in the upper corner of the garden gave it its only semblance of character. Their branches spread right over the lawn, and would provide shade for sitting under in the summer. But the green country was all round it, and from the southward-facing rooms there was the pleasantest prospect of quiet meadow, slow-gliding river, woods, and low distant hills, with a farmstead here and there, or a labourer's cottage, and the shingle spire of Farncombe Church crowning the roofs of the village a mile or so away to the right.

"This is the Doctor's study," Gosset would say, reverently opening the door of a room above the dining-room. "He'll be quiet enough here, and get the best of the view besides."

"My word, he's got enough books!"

The room was lined on three sides with shelves. Books had been unpacked from innumerable cases and put into them anyhow. The two middle-aged bustling maids, who had been sent down to get the house in preliminary order, had other things to attend to for the present than to see that they were put even the right way up. Gosset had taken the earliest possible opportunity of making friends with the maids. They had taken tea with him and his wife before going on to evening chapel. They were always pleased to see him when he brought his friends to look over the house, as the furniture was being moved in, and he was always careful to show them that the right hand of fellowship was very much in evidence in Roding.

"There'll be a lot of fine work done in this room—writings that'll be read all over the world. Now, *you* know something about carpets, Mr. Withers. That's as good a Turkey as you'll buy anywhere. I should think—brand new! Must have been bought for this room.

"Now, that's what I call furniture for a drawing-room! Fine gilt carved Console table, lustre chandelier—though where the gas is to come from—! Still, it's a handsome thing, and suitable, mind you. It *looks* like a drawing-room, this. Now, the drawing-room at the rectory—well, it has pretty things enough in it, but it's too much like an ordinary sitting-room, I say. That rosewood table, now, with a few handsomely bound books on it. Of course, the room isn't finished yet, but you can see what it's going to be—the real thing.

"Ah, this'll be a comfortable room, and bright, too. Books, you see, same as everywhere. Two well-upholstered arm-chairs—nothing but horsehair *here*, Mr. Withers, eh? The Doctor and Mrs. Merrow'll spend many a comfortable evening here, I know, after their late dinner. Dining-room's always the most comfortable room in a house. Real oil-paintings, too! Now, at the rectory there's nothing but engravings in the dining-room. Nice enough, but for those who can afford them there's no doubt oil-paintings are the thing for a dining-room.

"Well, Mary, you've got everything snug and comfortable down here, I see. Baize linings for the plate cupboard—see, Mr. Horrocks? Haven't unpacked the plate yet, I suppose? I dare say these cupboards won't be too big to hold all you've got coming, eh? Ah, you've got your china stowed away! That the best dessert service? That's something in *your* line, Mr. Jones. Minton, see? Every piece marked."

So Mr. Gosset, admiring and appraising all over the house, and delighted with such tangible signs of comfortably endowed gentility. It was a great point with him that Dr. Merrow was well off, and he would take his friends aside and hazard guesses about Mrs. Merrow's "fortune," of which he knew nothing, in a way to persuade them and

himself that it was more likely to run into six figures than five.

A more competent observer might have gathered from an inspection of "The Limes" that the coming mistress of the house was a lady of strictly Victorian taste, and not much of that, that the master left such matters entirely to her, and that both of them would be content to take conventional surroundings for granted, and busy themselves over more important affairs. For the upstairs study had everything in it that could minister to the wants of a man of books, and the business-looking writing-table in a recess of the dining-room, and the shelf of books above it, were obviously those of a lady, although Mr. Gosset and his friends had not noticed it.

Dr. Merrow had finally and firmly put a stop to anything in the nature of a public welcome. Mrs. Merrow had written on his behalf from Mentone. His health was still in a very unsatisfactory state, and he would have to live the quietest possible life for a long time to come. He could not promise even to take any regular part in the work that went on in connection with the chapel. He would conduct two services, if possible, every Sunday, and one on a week-day, but they must not be disappointed if that proved to be too much for him, and he had to call in help. Outside that, he begged his friends in Roding to leave him to himself, at any rate for a time.

Gosset was not able to ignore this. Even the tea-meeting had to be given up, and the only thing he could do was to find out by what train Dr. Merrow was expected to reach Roding, and take a few well-wishers on to the platform to "hold out the right hand of fellowship."

The travellers alighted from a first-class carriage. They had come right through. Dr. Merrow, in a heavy fur-lined coat, and wearing a respirator, looked very frail and

desperately tired. His wife helped him out of the carriage, and he leant on her arm when he reached the platform. She was a tall woman of ample proportions, active in movement, with an air of decision on her not unhandsome face. She was dressed in the manner of a woman who need not economize in clothes, but takes no particular pleasure in them.

Gosset and his little group came forward. Mrs. Merrow turned her quick eyes upon them. "Ah, Mr. Gosset," she said, "we have arrived at last. How do you do, Mr. Withers? How do you do, Mr. Jones? The Doctor is very tired with his journey. I am going to get him home as quickly as possible. He mustn't open his mouth till we get indoors."

She led him towards the station entrance, leaving the maid who had accompanied them to look after the luggage. Dr. Merrow held out his left hand to Gosset, as he walked, and nodded to the rest, a smile being inferred behind the respirator. Gosset had only time to utter a few half-incoherent words of mixed sympathy, expectation, and welcome before they had got into the carriage waiting for them, and driven away.

It was their own carriage—a landau, not in the first stage of newness, drawn by two horses of somewhat dejected mien, and driven by a coachman who looked as if he would be more at home doing something else. But it made up for a good deal of disappointment to Gosset. A carriage and pair! It was a height of gentility beyond which even the rectory could not aspire.

The rectory was empty at this particular time, undergoing restoration. Lady Ruth and Sylvia were in London with Lady Hampshire. Sir Richard French had carried the Rector off to the Pyrenees. Joyce and Eddie were at Folkstone, with their governess and some cousins. Ronald

was in Ireland with some other cousins. George Barton was in sole charge of the parish; but the Rector would only be away for one Sunday. He was coming back to take duty for the second, and going away again to join his wife for the inside of the week, with the children at Folkestone.

Three days after Dr. Merrow had arrived in Roding, the house being now in complete working order, Mrs. Merrow was sitting at her writing-table in the dining-room, very busy with her correspondence. She was a woman of untiring energy, and had done a vast amount of work in London in connection with the various societies and movements in which she was interested. All that she had been able to keep she had brought with her to Roding, and intended to go up to London at least once a week for a long day, when they should have become completely settled.

The dining-room ran through the house, and her table was at the window looking over the garden. The window was wide open, and the air that came in was wonderfully sweet and pure. She was beginning to like the restfulness of her new home, and the absence of distraction from outside, which could never be counted on in London, and enabled her to go straight at whatever she wanted to do and finish it at a given time. It was one of those delicious still spring evenings when the nature-lover is irresistibly called out of doors, to stay there as long as possible. Mrs. Merrow had been for her afternoon drive with her husband and had no wish to go out again; but she did feel something of the glamour of the spring as she sat by the open window, and found it soothing and inspiring at the same time. And yet she had dreaded this move to the country with all her soul, although she had never said so to her husband.

It was about a quarter to five. In the front part of the room tea was set for two on the big dining-table. Mary

would soon come in and light the spirit lamp under the kettle, and at five o'clock would go up and summon Dr. Merrow from his study.

Mary came in. "Please 'm, Mr. Barton has called."

Mrs. Merrow looked annoyed. "Who is Mr. Barton?" she asked.

"He's the curate, 'm. He asked for the master."

Mrs. Merrow looked at her. "Your master can't be disturbed now," she said. "Didn't you tell him that?"

In London it had been necessary to shield Dr. Merrow from uninvited visitors. He had been visible to no one but his intimate friends, except by appointment. Mary had shown herself skilful in acting as the first line of defence, and had frequently stopped an intruder from penetrating to her mistress as the second. Mrs. Merrow could not quite understand why she had not done so in this instance.

"I said I would call you, 'm," she said. There was the merest trifle of anticipation in her eyes. She had been brought up in the country. It was possible that the curate of the parish still presented himself not entirely in the light of an untried stranger trying to get through to her master.

But to Mrs. Merrow he was nothing else. "I suppose I had better go and see what he wants," she said, "though I am very busy. Don't bring in tea or call your master till I ring for you to let Mr. Barton out."

George was in the drawing-room, now adapted to its ultimately immovable state of furnishing and decoration. Its appearance was enough to cast a gloom over the spirit of anybody who might wish for some signs of life and occupation in a room, though its appointments would have aroused the enthusiastic appreciation of Gosset and his friends.

Mrs. Merrow came in with an air almost of enquiry. "How do you do, Mr. Barton?" she said, shaking hands. "I am afraid it will be impossible for you to see the Doctor now. He is resting, and we never disturb him at this time. Perhaps there is something that I can tell him for you."

George hardly knew what to reply to this very business-like reception. She had not even asked him to sit down.

"I hope Dr. Merrow has recovered from his journey," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "It tried him a good deal, but the complete rest has done him good already. I hope he will go straight on now, and we shall have no more set-backs. With this lovely weather he has every chance."

It almost seemed as if she expected him to go now. But George was not very quick. Having come in the ordinary way to open up an acquaintanceship, he could not quite grasp the fact that his visit could bear any other appearance, or should not appear a natural one. Mrs. Merrow, on the other hand, had no experience whatever of men paying such visits. In the world in which she had lived they left such duties to their wives, and a young unmarried man would not first enter a house to which he had not been invited; unless, of course, he "wanted something."

"I was not sure that you would be quite settled in yet," said George. "But the Rector is away for a week or two. I thought I would come as early as possible."

The connection of ideas was not quite apparent. But Mrs. Merrow thought she understood it now. The rectory people would naturally "call," unless the Rector happened to be of the sort of clergy who considers it incumbent upon him to hold aloof from those representing Dissent,

in which case they would be left quietly to themselves, and desire nothing different. This shy, rather awkward young man had been instructed, or had decided on his own account, to show that friendship would be offered when they returned; which was so far satisfactory, though it was rather a nuisance that he should have come at this particular hour, when she and her husband were just going to have tea. Still, she would probably be able to get rid of him in ten minutes.

"It was very kind of you, Mr. Barton," she said, taking her seat in one of the two chairs drawn up by the empty fireplace. "Do sit down."

George sat down. "Has Mr. French a family?" she asked, making affable conversation. "I think the Doctor met him when he was here last summer, but not Mrs. French."

George, in his complete ignorance of states of society other than that in which he had been brought up, except of those much below it, and tending to connect Dissent and advanced Radicalism together in his mind, wondered uneasily whether Lady Ruth's title was denied her of set purpose, or whether Mrs. Merrow was ignorant of it, which happened to be the case. He chose to accept the latter alternative. "She is Lady Ruth French," he said, with the intention of saving her from further mistakes. "She has three sons and two daughters. Ralph, the eldest, is just about my age. Joyce and Eddie, the little ones, are ten and eight. They are great friends of mine. I miss them very much when they go away."

Mrs. Merrow was as free from snobbery herself as any woman could be, but she had come up against it, and thought she recognized it in straightforward, unassuming George. He had insisted upon a title and claimed intimate connection with it in the same breath. This was the form in which

snobbery usually asserted itself in her experience. "It must be nice for you to have children to make friends with," she said rather coldly. "Do you live alone in Roding, Mr. Barton, or with your parents?"

"My parents are both dead," he said. "I have a little house here. In fact, I think I am your nearest neighbour. I am on the Bathgate Road, and there is a footpath opposite, across the fields."

This was making conversation. She was quite ready to do that, as long as it was necessary.

"We don't know the country very well yet," she said. "I take the Doctor for a drive every afternoon, and it is certainly very pretty country, though I think it would be dreadfully dull living here, unless one had plenty of work to do. What do you find to do, Mr. Barton? As there are two of you at the Church, I suppose you have not many sermons to prepare."

She looked at him in some curiosity. She had lived the whole of her life in London, except for a few weeks every year spent at the seaside or abroad. She had no experience at first hand of any mode of life except that lived in towns by people of the middle-class, from the more comfortably endowed section of which she had sprung. She had never looked upon her life as limited; nor had it been where intellectual interests were concerned. She had come across many great men; in many modern movements she was deeply concerned; she and her husband numbered amongst their friends more than a few of the best known of the clergy of the Church of England, and she would have said that the movements and the tendencies of that Church were better known to her than to the rank and file of the clergy themselves. Nevertheless she was entirely ignorant of how the life of such a young man as she now had before her would be made up in detail. It would be rather interesting to

draw something of it out of him, in the six or seven minutes that remained.

"The Rector generally preaches," said George. "I find plenty to do in the country. I was brought up in it mostly. I like it much better than London."

She smiled—a little patronizingly. "I'm afraid we shouldn't agree there," she said. "I find the country delightful for a change, and just as it is at present, or in the summer. There is something to make up for all the absorbing interests of life which you have when you are in the thick of what is going on. But in the winter, when you can't get out! I think you would need to have a great many resources in yourself to keep you from missing the interests of a town—especially of London, which is so much the centre of things. Of course, neither the Doctor nor I will be idle here; but I must confess to dreading the winter a little. I suppose you read a great deal, Mr. Barton?"

"No, not a great deal," said George.

"Then whatever you do with yourself when you are shut up in the house, perhaps for days together?"

"But I never am shut up in the house for days together," said George, smiling in his turn. "I am never shut up in the house at all. I am always out of doors, except after dark, or when I have work to do that keeps me in. And I do most of that in the evenings."

"But what do you *do*?" she persisted. "You can't walk about all day in the rain and the slush."

"I walk about when I visit. It is never too bad for that. And I go for walks with my cousins sometimes, though I am not very keen on walking for its own sake."

"Oh, you have cousins living here?"

"Ruth French is my cousin. I have always lived with them a good deal."

Then he must be acquitted of the implication of snobbery.

He seemed to be a modest youth, rather stupid. But what on earth *did* he do with himself in those horrible days of winter, which were as unknown to her in their actuality, except in connection with pavements, lights, traffic, and going to and fro from one warm building to another, as if they had been part of life spent in another country, or another century? He couldn't go for walks with his cousins all day and every day, even if he did so curiously waste the time that ought to be given to study. And his "district," to which she supposed him to refer when he talked of visiting, couldn't take more than one hour or two a week in such a small place as Roding. "But if you don't like walking for its own sake, what do you do the rest of the time? Do you drive—or bicycle, or what?"

"I drive if I have anywhere to go to," he said. He was getting rather tired of the cross-examination, and was inclined to be on the defensive over it. It did not occur to him that she could be so ignorant of what active young men found to do out of doors in the winter, when there was more to do than at other seasons of the year, as in reality she was. He thought she was trying to get him to confess, for reasons of her own, that a man of his profession ought to be in a position where there was not so much opportunity for being out of doors as in Roding. He was familiar with the contention, from other quarters. Stuckley would have said that a man ought to begin his work at any rate in a town, where he had no time to amuse himself. It was the very question that had exercised him for a year before he had taken Orders. He had thought about it again, increasingly, lately. But he was not prepared to discuss it on a first interview, with this rather peremptory lady, whose idea of social intercourse seemed to be rather that of the school than the drawing-room. "I shoot a good deal through the season," he said. "And I hunt generally one day a

week, sometimes two, if there is nothing that wants doing."

Again the suspicion of snobbery crossed her mind, or at any rate of conscious superiority. Shooting and hunting were aristocratic pursuits, not to be connected naturally with the duties of a curate, and she mistook the slight air of finality with which he answered her question, as an attempt at *hauteur*. She had heard foolish young men not brought up to field sports mention their hunting or shooting as if they lifted them to higher social levels, and did not reflect that to those to whom they had always been a matter of course they had no more significance of that sort than playing football or riding a bicycle.

"Oh, I see," she said. "Well, of course, if you can afford to go in for that sort of thing, and have time for it, I suppose you do manage to occupy yourself."

George thought this one of the rudest speeches he had ever heard from a woman of apparent breeding. If he could afford it! What could she be thinking of, to say such a thing! And what had he said to bring such an impertinence upon himself?

But she had not meant to be rude in the least. In her experience young men were roughly to be divided into two classes: those whose outlook on life was earnest, and those whose outlook was not. Even the first class had occasionally to be helped to express themselves, by "drawing out," which usually resolved itself into asking questions. As for the second, to which George obviously belonged, they were to be treated kindly, but from quite a separate standpoint, prevented from annoying "the Doctor" if possible, and kept in their places if they exhibited any of the vanities that beset callow youth. It could not have occurred to her that a man of George's age would expect to be treated on equal terms by a woman of hers, even in as far as they might have any-

thing in common. She would be ready to show a kindly interest in him and his pursuits, if they were such as she could approve of; otherwise she would speak her mind, with her usual directness, with no thought of her doing so being taken as less than her right. As for the idea that a speech of hers could be looked upon as an impertinence, in such a case!—the impertinence would lie in the young man's harbouring such a thought.

George rose from his seat. "I am very glad that Dr. Merrow is getting better here," he said. "I should like to have seen him, but I must wait for another time."

Her relief at his departure—for it was just on the stroke of five—more than balanced the slight annoyance she felt with him. She had thought it would rest with her to give him his *congé*. She sprang up cheerfully and rang the bell. "Oh, I hope you will be able to see him by-and-by," she said. "Just at present I don't want him to see more people than is necessary, although he is really almost himself again. There is nothing to worry us over his health now. Good-bye, Mr. Barton. It was kind of you to come and ask after him."

George shook hands with her and went out. Mary was carrying the kettle into the dining-room as he reached the hall, and he saw the table laid for tea, for two.

CHAPTER XV

RODING CHAPEL

DR. MERROW came downstairs rather slowly. He looked very much better than he had done on his arrival. There was, in fact, little the matter with him now. He had been very close to a complete breakdown, and the reaction that had come upon him after he had cut himself off from active work had given his wife cause to fear that his retirement might have come too late. But the rest was beginning to tell. He had picked up more in the three days he had been in Roding than during the month they had stayed in the South of France. The anxious experiment looked like turning out a complete success.

He came into the room with a cheerful air. "What a glorious evening!" he said. "I have been sitting at my window, looking out on those quiet fields, and it has been a real refreshment of spirit. Now, my dear, I am quite ready for refreshment of body. I think we might potter up and down the garden for half an hour after tea, if you have nothing special to do."

Her face lightened. So far, it had been difficult to get him to eat anything; and he had shunned all bodily exertion.

"If you wrap up well it can't do you any harm," she said. "No, I have nothing to do that can't wait for half an hour."

"Have you had visitors?" he asked. "I thought I heard the front door shut just before Mary came up for me."

"Only Mr. French's curate," she said. "He came to

ask after you and to say that Mr. French and his family were away."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me he was here?" he asked. "I should like to have seen him. I was doing nothing. I like to see a young man who is setting out on his path and talk to him a little, if he shows himself inclined to one. I suppose he is a young man?"

"Oh, yes. But I don't think you would find Mr. Barton very responsive, Edgar. He is not at all like the young men who enter our ministry. He seems to spend most of his time hunting and shooting. I thought I had better preserve you from him."

"Oh, the sporting curate!" said Dr. Merrow. "One has read about them in novels. No, I don't suppose I should get on very well with that variety. I should be too ignorant in the things that interested him. Still, I suppose we shall come across him, living in the same little place. I must see if I can acquire a small stock of suitable knowledge."

It had not occurred to Mrs. Merrow that they would come across George any more than they might wish, because they lived in the same place. She had hardly begun to envisage the sociabilities of country life. In her experience you met just those people you wanted to, on intimate terms, and saw as little as you wanted to of those you did not care about, even if they lived next door. You met innumerable people, if you lived an active life, and accepted opportunities for ordinary social intercourse; but unless there was some reason for following up an acquaintance, you met them and forgot them. It had not yet dawned on her that if you met people, however dissimilar in tastes from yourself, who lived in the same corner of the country, some measure of acquaintanceship was bound to follow, unless you chose to live the life of a recluse; and that even that would need some positive course of action before you would be left alone.

"I suppose we shall have to see something of the people at the rectory," she said. "By-the-by, did you know that Mr. French's wife was Lady Ruth French?"

"I think Gosset, or somebody, did tell me. Yes, I did know she was a lady of title."

"I didn't. I called her 'Mrs. French,' and Mr. Barton corrected me. He is her cousin. By the way, I don't know whether *he* has a title of any sort. If so, it might account for— However, we can find that out. What is Mr. French like, Edgar? It is curious that we have hardly ever mentioned him. He seems to be the only person of importance in the town. Is he a man that you will like to have near you at all—to talk to, I mean? If so, it will be a great boon. I believe you will miss seeing clever people more than you think now."

He smiled at her. "I shouldn't think Mr. French is what you would call clever," he said. "He is a fine-looking man, rather of the stately Roman type, though I believe he is not what they call an advanced Churchman. He has courteous manners. I don't know more of him than that. Gosset introduced me to him in the street, and we said a few words and parted."

She sat with a slight frown on her face for a minute or so; but it was not occasioned by anything she had heard of the Rector, for she said presently: "Edgar, I think you will have to be just a little careful with Mr. Gosset. He is rather inclined to take hold of handles. He came in this morning to see you. I was able to deal with him, but he may give you some trouble at the chapel, unless you show him plainly that you do not want to have to do with the business side of things."

"My dear, I shall refer him to you for anything of that sort. Like Mr. Balfour, I am a child in such matters, and he will soon get to know it."

"Well, I told him this morning that you must not be worried over such things. After his being so persistent about that idea of a public meeting, and my letter to him, I was surprised that he should have come about the things he did this morning, and I showed him so, I hope without giving him offence."

"Oh, I hope so. He is a good fellow, Gosset. He has practically carried the cause on his own shoulders here. Like many business men interested in good works he is apt to exercise himself overmuch about accessories. It is not to be wondered at. Look at his having got that nice little chapel built, where there are so few interested, and none of them overburdened with this world's goods. He must have worked very hard for that for years, and it must have filled his thoughts night and day. It is well for us preachers that there are such people to do the necessary things that we certainly couldn't do for ourselves. What did the good Gosset want this morning? I think I put everything down plainly for the Sunday service."

"Yes, you did. But he wanted to talk it all over; there was nothing that he could not have made out for himself. And there was a question about the bills, which he says ought to have been put up long before."

"Bills! I told him I didn't want any bills. I am the regular pastor here. If my name is painted up on the board, that is enough."

"Did you tell him that definitely?"

"I said so quite plainly when I talked over coming here with him. I remember he said something about bills then. Perhaps he has forgotten."

"We'll hope so, as he didn't mention it. I didn't know you would object. I arranged it with him. There will be just the time of the morning service, and your name."

"In large letters, I suppose? The good Gosset would insist upon that."

"Well, yes. But if you don't like it I can write and tell him so."

"Let him have his bills for this Sunday. I don't want to make too much of points that don't really matter, or to interfere with his arrangements. But we are apt to be twitted about our bills, you know, by our friends outside, and I think there is something in their criticisms. If I didn't, I shouldn't mind what they said. Besides, I am a retiring man, and I have had so few opportunities of retirement. I want to be left in peace here, to dig my little patch in this lovely garden, to talk to the dear people who will gather with us every Sabbath, and show them some of the things that God has shown me. I don't want to arouse any opposition, unless it is over something that cannot be avoided. I don't think Mr. French will want to interfere with me, and I shall give him as little opportunity as possible. And I shan't want to interfere with him. He must have had it pretty well all his own way here, and he seems a kindly, active sort of man. God bless him in his work, as I pray that He will bless me in mine."

Mrs. Merrow respected his attitude in such matters, although with her more mundane mind she could not always take it herself. She seldom went as far as she had done this evening in discussing with him such details. Her whole keen active intelligence was set on sparing him anything that might distract his thoughts from the quiet musings that bore such abundant fruit. She was wholly admirable in the way she subjected her so dissimilar nature to his. Her habit of mind was not essentially religious; although perhaps she would have been shocked to hear it; but she recognised her husband's genius to the full, and guarded and cherished it with daily and hourly care.

She said nothing more about Gosset, but made up her mind to keep a very sharp eye on him. It was plain enough to her what he wanted, as he had himself made it plain enough to the Rector and George Barton. She was inclined to sympathize with his desires, if not with his methods; but if her husband wanted something different, then she would see that he got what he wanted. Gosset had mentioned all sorts of plans for advertising Roding Chapel and its new pastor in connection with it. He must quickly and unmistakably be shown that those plans must be dropped. Her husband's mind was set on a quiet work amongst a quiet few, as far as his work would be concerned with this little pastorate. Gosset, with his arrangements for "seats in the aisle," and his already dawning plans for a structural alteration of the chapel, a larger organ, coloured windows, elaborate arrangements for periodical "interchange of pulpits" so that Roding might grow into a centre from which importance would radiate to regions around, must be checked in his ambitions. And above all, he must be made to understand—and this would be a more delicate task, though not one for which Mrs. Merrow felt herself in the least unfitted—that it was not open to him to come in and out to his pastor whenever he felt inclined.

She knew well enough from her friends amongst the wives of other ministers how tiresome deacons could make themselves, and what power a common pushing man could exercise over a refined and retiring one. Her husband had been spared those experiences. His chapel had not been quite like others; it had been the place where he had preached, and nothing more; and everything had been done by his church officers to spare him trouble. They had not come to Roding to immerse themselves in the subsidiary affairs of a small chapel—although she, as far as in her lay, would be

quite ready to do what was necessary in that respect,—nor to further the plans of such as Gosset. Gosset had offered a pulpit, and he must be content with his abundant reward, which was to have that pulpit filled in a way that he could never have expected.

Nevertheless, Gosset found his way through to Dr. Merrow, early in the following week.

He had been deeply disappointed over what had happened, or rather had not happened on the Sunday; and even Mrs. Merrow had felt some surprise, although she had expressed none.

For the present Dr. Merrow was only to preach on the Sunday mornings. Those who had heard his first sermon had heard something quite out of the common in a small country chapel, although the sermon had been so short and so beautifully simple in language that all except those who had ears to hear it—and they were not the majority of those present—had gone away disappointed. Gosset was not one of them. He had listened to every word with greedy ears, and sighed when the end came. In his queer mixed nature, the taste for goodness was strong, and he knew its accents when he heard them. While the sermon was being preached he forgot all about his plans for aggrandizement, all about the empty seats, and the blank dismay in which he had begun the service.

For there were many empty seats. Gosset was thankful that he had kept those to be placed in the aisle in reserve. The chapel had always been larger than was necessary to its regular supporters, though surely not larger than Dr. Merrow might be expected to fill. And yet those whom Gosset's willing helpers had shewn into the pews as strangers or new-comers had not sufficed to fill the spaces habitually left vacant. The majority of them were nonconformists from outlying villages. Habitual church-goers amounted to

a possible dozen; of those who went regularly to neither church nor chapel there were none.

There were several reasons for this. If Dr. Merrow had preached his first sermon in the evening, the chapel would certainly have been full, and Gosset would probably have attained his splendid ideal of seats in the aisle. Sunday evening is the time when the country takes to novelties of church-going, not Sunday morning, when a great part of it is cooking its dinner or otherwise preparing for the more complete savouring of the day of rest. Those who practise morning church-going do so not with any sense of adventure, however mild, but go where they are accustomed to go. The congregation at the Parish Church was not sensibly smaller than usual. Moreover, Gosset had so talked up Dr. Merrow as a rival to anyone who could be heard at the Parish Church that he had succeeded in arousing a faint sense of loyalty to that establishment, even amongst those who fully intended to go and hear the renowned Dr. Merrow some time or other. Added to this, his renown was actually small in this countryside, remote from talk of great London preachers. There were many who had never heard of him until Gosset had dinned his name into their ears. And finally, the English country is not interested in preaching, although here and there it may be brought to be so.

Gosset's chagrin at the failure of his hopes for a brilliant start was so great as to hide from him the fact that Dr. Merrow could not help making his way quietly. He felt personally responsible for the empty seats, and the best part of his feeling was that the great preacher would suffer despondency at the coldness of his reception. But Mrs. Merrow would never have let him get through to her husband if this had been all he had come to talk about.

He talked about it to her, when she received him on Tuesday morning, and she had her opportunity of instilling

into his mind the points that she was determined to have clearly understood. "If I had had my own way," she concluded, "the Doctor would not have accepted a charge at all, until he had completely recovered his health, and then, of course, he would have gone back either to his own chapel, where they would be pleased enough to have him, or to some other, where he would have got the same opportunities. But he was very anxious to do a little regular work, I mean apart from his writing, which will now be the chief thing with him; and I need scarcely say that there is not a vacant pulpit anywhere in our denomination that would not have welcomed him; or he might have built a chapel in some suitable place where there was none. He doesn't want a large congregation, Mr. Gosset. It would be too much for him, for one thing. He was quite content with the numbers that heard him on Sunday, and pleased just to have his own flock around him. That is all he wants, at any rate for the present; and you and I must save him as much trouble over it as we can. In London, nobody ever thought of coming to him about matters of detail, and it would hardly be reasonable to expect *more* of him here than there, would it?"

Gosset saw it, though he did not like it. Nor did he like Mrs. Merrow, in spite of her being an "heiress." She had talked to him pretty plainly, and he had got it into his head that he was being headed off from the desired and desirable intercourse with his pastor because he was a tradesman.

"Well, I'm glad the Doctor wasn't disappointed," he said. "I was. I should have liked the whole of Roding to have heard that beautiful sermon. It would have done a great deal of good. On the whole they're an ungodly lot, and those of them who go to church don't get much to make them anything else. However, we must leave it to God, and wrestle in prayer about it. Could I see the Doctor

this morning, Mrs. Merrow? Or I could come this afternoon, if he's busy now."

Her brows drew together. She had thought that she had made it clear that he could not see the Doctor at any time, except when they met on Sundays, or at other suitable times to be arranged by her.

He saw the frown, and resented it. "I've no wish to trouble him about the affairs of the chapel," he said, "though I'm bound to say it takes a little getting used to for a deacon never to be able to see his minister. I want to see him about a purely private matter."

"Isn't it anything that I can do, Mr. Gosset?"

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid not."

"Because Dr. Merrow leaves *all* business matters to me."

"This isn't a business matter; and it's nothing to do with the chapel. I needn't mention the chapel at all to Dr. Merrow, if you think it is unbecoming for one of his deacons to do so."

She took no notice of the little dig. "I wish you would give me some idea of what it is, Mr. Gosset," she said with a smile. "I do so want to keep the Doctor undisturbed. It is so necessary for him now. And he writes and reads in the morning. I don't say he *couldn't* see you now, but he has always been accustomed to have his mornings to himself."

"I could just as well call this afternoon, though I'm a busy man, and I've come on purpose to see him. I want to ask his advice about one of my sons, that I'm in trouble about."

She made no further effort against him, but went upstairs, and a few minutes later he was admitted to the presence.

CHAPTER XVI

DR. MERROW AND GOSSET

DR. MERROW rose from a low chair by the fire, where he had been writing at a movable desk. He was in a long dressing-gown, and looked very thin and tall as he came forward.

He did not smile as he took Gosset's hand. "Dear friend," he said, "my wife tells me you are in trouble. Let us kneel down and ask God to help us to see a way out together, and if there is no way out, to help us to bear the trouble."

They knelt down together by the table. "Loving and merciful Father," Dr. Merrow prayed, "who didst send thy dear Son into the world to take all our burdens upon him, and to give us joy and peace in believing on him, we pray thee to be with us as we talk together, and lay our difficulties before thee. If they arise from any frailty of our weak human nature—so prone to go astray, if for a moment we lose our hold of thy guiding hand,—show us the course to take, and give us strength to take it. If they are such as thou in thine infinite wisdom has sent to us that we may bear them as coming from thee, show us thy will in chastening us, and bring us nearer to thee, so that out of our very sorrows we may raise praises to thy Name—be comforted,—upheld,—strengthened,—tempered—to thy good ends, by thy most Blessed and Holy Spirit."

Gosset echoed his "Amen" fervently, and arose from his knees, after a pause, with a choking sensation in his throat. He had walked down to "The Limes" with rather an ugly

look on his face, and had seemed to be rehearsing speeches which would hardly have removed it. But it was gone now. He did look as if he were in trouble, as he began his story.

Dr. Merrow looked very grave as he told him of his son's fall from virtue, and drew in his breath from time to time as if he were in pain. He asked for no details other than those which Gosset volunteered, until he came to the point where he had sent Percy to London, when he put one or two questions, speaking gently and sympathetically, as to the sort of surroundings he was in.

"It wasn't a big shop," said Gosset. "I know the temptations that come from that," and told him about the arrangements he had made with Briggs to look after his son—strictly. "I want to be quite fair to the boy from beginning to end," he said. "It's the strictness he has kicked against—that and not being able to get out so much as he did here and play his games and all that. Perhaps it's been too strict. Mr. Briggs is a Christian man, but he's inclined to keep a tight hand. Still, I did think strictness was wanted, and if Percy had taken it as he ought to have done, it wouldn't have been for always. I never meant it to be. I don't think I was wrong in wanting him kept strict after what had happened."

The statement was half a question. "Love overcometh the law," said Dr. Merrow softly. "My friend, can you not go and see your son and deal tenderly with him? He is very young. We have to remember our own youth and its temptations. If you were to go to London and see him——"

"But he's not there, sir. He is back here in Roding—without my permission—in fact, against it."

"He has come back to you? Then——"

"No, not to me. I haven't even seen him. I don't *want*

to see him till I have made up my mind what I ought to do and say. He has come to Mr. Barton."

"To Mr. Barton?"

"The curate here. There's a good deal to tell you still, Doctor. Mr. Barton is a relation of the Rector's. He's lived here a good deal, and he and young Mr. French have always played games and that sort of thing with the boys and lads of the place. He went into the Church a year or two ago, and came to live here, and most of what he has done since has just been playing about with the lads, the same as he did before. He has a good deal of influence over them, and I'm not going to say it's a bad influence, though as far as I can see it has nothing religious in it whatever. I let Percy play cricket with them in the summer, but when it came to his wanting to join Mr. Barton's club for the winter, I said no. He teaches them to fight, and play billiards, and all that sort of thing; and even if it *does* keep the rougher lads from getting into mischief in other ways, I can't think it's a good thing for a young man who has been brought up to look forward to spending his life in the service of God to use his spare time in that way."

"Is there no religious influence exercised in this winter club at all?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. But what sort of religious influence is it likely to be, Doctor? If Mr. Barton can get the rough youths to go to church sometimes—or some of them to say they'll be confirmed—he'd think he was doing a great thing. I dare say if he could get Percy to be confirmed he'd think it was a great thing. I should have had to face that—his being drawn away from what *we* believe, and what he seemed happy with, before he got took up with this young curate. I know it isn't for me to judge others, Doctor; but here's a young man, with plenty of money, brought up to think of very little except amusing himself.

He goes into the Church—I don't know why—very likely with the idea of coming in for this living by-and-by, or one like it—and he spends a great deal of his time amusing himself—hunting, playing games, and all that—even now that he's taken the work of the ministry on himself. I can't see much religion in it; and it isn't what I want my children to look upon as religion either."

"Did you say your son had come here to stay with Mr. Barton? Why has he done that?"

"I haven't told you everything yet, Doctor. Mr. Barton went up to London a week or two ago and saw Percy. He came to me afterwards and told me that they had fixed it up between them that the best thing the boy could do would be to go to Canada and start farming. If I wouldn't give my consent there and then, Mr. Barton had advised him to wait till he was twenty-one, which he will be in July, and then go without it. That's what I'd got for giving my permission for him to see Percy. I ought to have said, 'No, you shan't see him at all.'"

Gosset's tone had insensibly altered. The effect of his reception had begun to wear off. Dr. Merrow threw a quick glance at him. "Do you mean," he asked, "that Mr. Barton encouraged him to defy you, and told you so? I don't know Mr. Barton. I must take what you tell me of him entirely from you. My friend, you won't want me to form any but the right opinion."

Gosset bethought himself. "I don't want to be unfair," he said, and within certain very narrow limits he spoke only the truth. "Mr. Barton didn't behave otherwise than as a gentleman should, I mean in the way he put things. I won't say I think he's behaved *right*, because I don't. You see, Doctor, it all comes from this idea of games, and exalting your body above your soul. A young man like Mr. Barton, he doesn't see that we can't all of us live what he calls an

open air life. What sympathy can *he* have with a young man going into a business like mine? He'd think he was doing a good thing in persuading him to throw it up, though Percy's my eldest son, and his way was plainly marked out for him to follow me in it; and he never objected to it either—thought himself lucky to *have* such a business in front of him—till he got in with Mr. Barton. Well, they put their heads together. The boy's dissatisfied with his life, reads a lot of glowing advertisements, I dare say, of life in Canada, and is full of the idea of throwing up everything and going off there. Mr. Barton, who's not more than a few years older than he is, is just as much taken with the idea, and instead of telling him to think it over and talk to me about it, as he should have done, actually encourages him to think it's a sort of virtue to throw over a *shop*, which of course he despises, and go off to a new country and work with his hands. Those are the very words he used. It's what Percy is fit for. That's what *he* thinks. What I think doesn't seem to count."

Dr. Merrow smiled at him. "I think you have put it very fairly," he said. "I can see the enthusiastic young man full of his idea, and expecting you to see it in exactly the same light without any time for reflection. Well, we must make allowances for young men and their enthusiasms, dear friend. God give us the same amount of enthusiasm in the things that *we* have at heart! Then I suppose, the idea being quite fresh to you, and possibly having been pressed in a way that was not altogether wise, you refused to consider it, possibly—I don't know—also in a way that was not altogether wise. And now these hot-headed young men have taken the matter into their own hands."

Gosset's grievance, reduced to these terms, did not seem so likely to gain him an adherent as it had done when he had brought it to Dr. Merrow. And, indeed, it was difficult

to see how he could support it at all if he were to tell everything. He was now quite reconciled to the idea of Percy going to Canada—at George's expense. After his interview with George he had congratulated himself on the clever way he had managed it. He would be relieved of his chief difficulties at a stroke, and could take up the position of an outraged and defied parent, until the time came, when it would be too late to alter arrangements entered into, for him to make the best of it, and be reconciled to his son at the last moment, before getting him off his hands for good. In his satisfaction at the success with which he had baited what can only be called his trap, he had not realized that he had made it plain even to George's slow-moving wits what was in his mind, and that his failure to go up to London and talk to his son, as he had promised to do, or even to write to him, made it still more obvious that he was actually inviting a definite step. But he could not tell Dr. Merrow his side of all this. In his improved frame of mind he did not want to think about it himself.

"Well, there's a lot behind it," he said. "But for the present we can put it aside. There's something a good deal more serious still. Percy wants to marry that bad girl who led him astray, and take her with him. It's *that* I've come to you about, Doctor."

He looked at Dr. Merrow anxiously. He had been able to form no idea of how he would be likely to view the matter, and wanted to find out before he expressed his own views.

"Tell me about it," said Dr. Merrow, after a pause. "How did he make his wish known to you?"

"Mr. French came to see me, after I had seen Mr. Barton. Percy had told Mr. Barton, and Mr. Barton had told Mr. French. The boy couldn't talk—or write—to *me*."

It will have to be done through the clergy that he's made friends with."

"Pardon me a moment, my friend. It was through Mr. French that the sad news first came to you, was it not?"

"Yes. Mr. French learnt it from the mistress of the girl, and came and told me."

"I remember that you said so. Then it was not—you don't mean that Mr. French was—was interfering in any way unwarrantably, in coming to you?"

"No, I don't mean that, though you'll understand, Doctor, when you have been here a little longer, that Mr. French would be inclined to offer his advice—or even try to direct—in many matters in Roding that have nothing to do with him or his church. He's that sort of man."

"Please go on."

"When he came to me first he was dead against the idea of a marriage—not because it would be a case of a believer yoked with an unbeliever—but from a purely worldly point of view. He——"

"My friend, you mustn't say that, unless he said so himself, and he could hardly have done so, standing where he does."

"Well, Doctor, to my mind he did say so, as plainly as if he'd said it in the words I've used. He regarded it as a 'slip.' I'm not sure he didn't use that very word. The lad was young. He must forget all about it—learn his lesson, of course, and not get into that sort of trouble again. Oh, there was plenty of *morality* in it—but it mustn't affect his life. As I say, he was to forget it, and go on as if it had not happened. He couldn't do that if he was to marry the girl, and that was Mr. French's reason for being so dead against his marrying her. I'm not doing him an injustice in saying so. He would say it himself if you were to ask him."

"Does he say so now?"

"No. He's turned round now. What I mean is that he *would* say that, if he didn't think the circumstances had altered. He made that quite plain."

"How have the circumstances altered?"

"I can't see they have myself. I can only tell you what *he* says, and I'll do that as fairly as I can. For one thing, the girl is not as bad as he thought her, or, at any rate, she's sorry for what she did—and not only in the way that a girl who had brought that upon herself would be. That's owing to Lady Ruth. She's been with her a great deal ever since it happened. There's nobody here who doesn't like Lady Ruth, Doctor. She's a fashionable lady, and does very little of what ordinary clergymen's wives do in visiting and all that; but she's got a very kind heart, and if there is anybody really in trouble she'll go to them. She came to me and Mrs. Gosset when we lost a little one, and she was very tender. I must say she did us both good, though she never spoke a word of religion to us, as you might have expected. She went to this girl directly she heard of what had happened, and Miss Budd, whose service she was in, had turned her straight out of the house; and I've no doubt that it *has* made a difference to the girl, as Mr. French said, though it can't have brought her to the light, as a true Christian might have done."

"We can thank God for such good women, brother. Human sympathy and tenderness are his gifts, and he can work through them. He used them to console you in *your* deep trouble."

"Yes, it brought us nearer to him. I ought not to say Lady Ruth isn't a Christian, though she makes no profession of it that *we* should look for. She acts like one, anyhow, when there's real trouble. Well, then, another thing was that this girl would make him a good wife in a new

country, better than if she'd not been brought up to work. I needn't go into all that. But the great thing was that Percy wanted it. He *wants* to marry her, and how can I let him do it, Doctor? She's the daughter of a rough working man—an atheist, who makes an open scoff of religion, and came and told when Mr. French was there—the first time, I mean—that *he* wouldn't have a marriage. And why? Because he wanted to disgrace me who stands for the things he hates—by bringing up the child that's coming to be a reproach to me."

Dr. Merrow made that low sibilant sound of distress.

"That's the gospel truth, Doctor," persisted Gosset. "What surroundings for a son of mine to take a wife from! And the girl *wasn't* a good girl, however she may be softened now. I've found out a lot about her. She tempted my son astray, and I don't believe he was the first. You can't say these things for certain, but I've got enough evidence to make it doubtful whether the law could fix him as the father of the child that's going to be born."

Again the indrawn breath. Dr. Merrow's face bore a look of suffering. He was asking himself what help *he* could give in such a case as this. It was outside his experience altogether. He had preached to hundreds of thousands; he had heard confessions from those who had sinned deeply, and had comforted and guided many a stricken soul. He was a great doctor of the soul. But he had never descended into the crude tumult of life and dealt with the difficulties and troubles of ordinary struggling erring humanity as they occur from day to day. He had been guarded and sheltered. Any humdrum easy-living parish priest, who went about among his people at all, could draw from the men and women he knew a sample more true to the common type than he could. He was like a physician with God-given gifts of healing, who had never walked the hospitals. He had come

down to this little country town, thinking to find his task light in comparison with the task he had had to give up, and here he was confronted with a problem which at no point of his experience he had had to touch before.

"What am I to do, Doctor? I don't know what to do. What's the right thing to do?"

Yes, Gosset wanted to do the right thing, putting aside for the moment consideration of the mean thing he had already done. He had driven away the Rector with indignation, reminding him of the different attitude he had taken up before, and with bitter reference to the part Miss Budd was now known to be playing, in girding up the girl's mother to demand what had first been refused. But the strictures of his conduct all over Roding had bitten in to him. He had acted as any worldly-minded man might have been expected to act, and his enemies had not been slow to remind him of it. Was it so out of the question, after all, that the marriage should take place? He had come to Dr. Merrow prepared to acquiesce in it sorrowfully if he should so advise. But not before he had made his own talk good, and raised some prejudice against those who had offended him. Besides, Dr. Merrow must hear of what had happened and was happening some time. It would be better that he should hear it from him first.

And yet he was sincere in saying that he wanted to do what was right.

Dr. Merrow raised his head, which had been resting on his long thin hand. "If ever there was a case for humbly waiting upon God's guidance," he said, "this is it. We will pray about it together before you go; we will never cease praying about it until we see light."

Gosset was quite ready now to pray about it; but he had an uneasy suspicion that if he began to pray in the spirit that he should, he would find the light already there. It

was different for Dr. Merrow, and he wanted to know what he thought of the general question as to such marriages.

"Mr. French says that each case of this sort must be decided by itself," he said. "Isn't that mere opportunism? Oughtn't I to be guided by considerations of whether such a marriage would make for my son's eternal welfare? Ought I to consider whether it will put me right with people who have blamed me for standing out against it?"

"No," he answered at once, to the latter question, "not unless you think they were right to blame you. You won't want to do that when you have laid the matter before God, and prepared yourself to accept his guidance. Such thoughts as that will not trouble you. They are nothing. As for your son's welfare—his spiritual welfare—yes, you must think of it. But I feel that I cannot say anything to help you there without seeing him, and perhaps without seeing this poor young woman—or—I don't know—if it were possible—the kind lady who has befriended her. I do think—you asked me just now—that it is impossible to lay down a rule of obligation. I am only groping—don't take what I say now as my firm conviction. These sins of the flesh—must we say that before they can be forgiven they must be"—he began to speak very slowly with pauses between his words—"legalized—corrected—sanctified—by marriage. No, I think not. It would not always be possible. Marriage is a kind of sacrament—of—holy love—that God should smile upon. It would be debasing it—if—— You cannot think that in all cases of sudden temptation—a careless unthinking youth—a woman selling herself daily to sin—it would be doing God's high will for his poor weak creatures. No, I couldn't say—I can't say—speaking with all submission—that we can put aside the circumstances of each case."

Gosset watched him as if fascinated. He saw him in his ripe manhood so untouched by evil that one of the com-

monest occurrences of human life set him wondering and puzzling as if he had now heard of it for the first time. He—Gosset—knew well enough that the problem he was slowly working out in his brain was no problem at all. No man who lived in the world as it is could say that every lapse from virtue must be atoned for by an act that would not even be possible, perhaps in the majority of cases. What he did see dimly—and it rather surprised him—was that Dr. Merrow was looking at the question only from one point of view. Even the Rector had found it hard to hold his first opinion strongly, when the claims of the woman were stated in the same terms as those of the man. And it had been the claims of the woman that had been thrown at Gosset by his detractors. "Yes, all very nice for you, and the young rip that's come out just like others after all. But what about the poor girl? You don't think nothing of *her*. That's *your* Christianity." It had made a sore place. He could not put that side of the question away from him altogether.

He could not help mentioning it now. "They are always telling me," he said, "that if a young man gets a girl into trouble, as they put it, he ought to marry her, and not leave her to take all the punishment, when there's a child coming."

Dr. Merrow looked at him earnestly. "They say that!" he repeated. "You mean the people who live here, and know all the circumstances and the parties concerned?"

"I mean the people who want to put me in the wrong," said Gosset, rather sulkily.

"But they wouldn't say that, if it were a case of a young man sinning with—with a harlot."

Gosset started at the Biblical word, and at the inferences behind it. Dr. Merrow was no fool, in his innocence of evil.

"I don't know that they wouldn't," he said. "And I don't think you've got it quite right, Doctor, either. The

country isn't like a big town. There aren't those sort of women. But the young people get together, and in a way it's worse. They lead each other on. Sometimes it's the girl who is persuaded, sometimes it's the man. The nearest you get to what goes on in the streets of a big town is when a girl has gone wrong once, and comes of bad parents who don't look after her. Then she's ready to go with anybody, and sometimes she drifts up to London and becomes a loose woman like the rest."

"Then there is a great deal more to be said for marriage, to stop that dreadful descent—more than we have said yet?"

"Yes, I suppose there is, where it's known to be a first fall."

"And there is the question of fatherhood. If a child is born, and the parents do not marry, what happens?"

"The father has to pay towards its keep. The mother brings it up."

"It grows up to know that there is a mark upon it. It is different from the rest, who have happy innocent homes and the love of father and mother—all the tenderness round them that is so beautiful—so divine—in the early years. It is an incubus, practically disowned by the father, who may marry elsewhere and have children to bring up in a way so different; a reproach to the poor mother, who is cut off now from those pure joys."

"I am afraid there are too many rough bad homes, Doctor, amongst that class, for such a bringing up to be much noticed. The women with natural children often bring them up well, too. It isn't held up against them as much as you'd think. And they often marry, too, and the child gets brought up with the rest."

Dr. Merrow thought long and earnestly. Then he rested his kind eyes on Gosset's face. "Could you bring yourself to contemplate—to consent—to forward this marriage—

knowing both the young people—if the way seemed pointed out to it?" he asked. "Oh, my friend, I know how hard it may be for you. You had hoped that your son would some day marry a good innocent girl, whom you could love as your own daughter. He would have his happy home, as you have yourself, and you would renew your own early happiness in seeing his little ones, if God sent them, grow up in their sweet sheltered innocence. This is so different. The shadow of sin is over it—and disgrace. You can't put that aside. It must affect you in the place where you live and have your friends. I know you can't put that aside. But—it's for you to decide—that might, perhaps, be made less painful for you if you came to see that this idea of their going away altogether were possible—advisable. I do think, if you will let me say so—on a matter which is no business of mine—that for *them*, if they were to go together, it might be the best thing. The shadow—of their fall—would hang less darkly over them; it would be atoned for, as far as a sin can be humanly atoned for. They might then come to forget it—as your friend, the Rector, said—working together to make their new home—in no disgrace—bringing up the little one, which must be a strong link between them, in the fear of their own loving Father in heaven, serving him themselves in their new bright life. If it could be, dear friend! I don't know; I haven't seen either of them yet. You can judge better than I can. And God will help you to judge, if you ask him. He might ask what would be a great sacrifice from you. And if he does, you may be very sure that he will look after the result, much better than you could. You may trust your son to him without a fear."

Gosset was much touched. Yes, he could bring himself to take this step. Put in the light of a religious duty he could even do it gladly, for he would gain more than one

reward. But at least as long as he remained under Dr. Merrow's influence the only reward that he cared about was the salving of his own conscience. It was sweet balm to him to be relieved of his troubles in this way. It was not an easy thing for him to contemplate a marriage between his son and Morton's daughter, in spite of some advantages that would accrue to himself; and if he consented to it, surely he might take to himself the solace that came from doing right at the cost of sacrifice.

"I'll think about it and pray about it, Doctor," he said. "I believe it is what God points out for me to do. You've helped me very much to see things right, and I'm grateful to you. I *should* like you to see Percy, if it wouldn't be asking too much of you. It's a serious enough step for him to take, however we look at it; and if you were to talk to him, I'm sure it would help him to go into it, if we decide it's the right thing, in a proper spirit.'

"Oh, my dear friend, I will gladly see him, if he would like to see me. I was going to ask if I might. Yes; at *any* time. I love young people; it is a great joy to me to talk to them. You will ask him to come and see me here, and we will make friends. God be with us as we talk together! Let us kneel down and give thanks to his Blessed Name."

CHAPTER XVII

PERCY GOSSET

"MR. BARTON, I don't want to go and see him. What has *he* got to do with it? Why should I have to talk things over with him that we've settled already, and that he only knows about through my father?"

"For one thing, because your father asks him to, Percy. You came down here to try and make it up with him before you went away. Now that there are signs that he may come round, you ought not to put yourself against him."

"Is he coming round? I can't say that his letter looks much like it."

The letter that Gosset had written would hardly have run in the same way if he had not allowed a night and the best part of a day to elapse between his interview with Dr. Merrow and the writing of it:

DEAR PERCY: As you have defied my wishes, and taken the advice of others on a serious step that it was your duty to consult me first about, you can hardly expect me to welcome you here with open arms. With regard to your going to Canada, I do not say now that I shall oppose it any further. You have brought such deep trouble on us, and seem so determined, with the help of others, to set yourself against anything I can do to help you to make amends for your sins, that I shall not be sorry to have your example removed from your innocent brothers and sisters. I shall not refuse to see you before you go, but I hope you will come in a frame of mind that will not give your poor mother greater distress than she has reason to feel about you already.

With regard to the other matter on which you write, it is far too serious a thing to be dealt with in a letter. I have laid it all from the beginning before Dr. Merrow, and I wish you to go and see him. When you have done that you can communicate

with me again. You had better go to Dr. Merrow to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, and if it is not convenient for him to see you then, get an appointment made for some other time as soon as possible, and keep it punctually.

Your much-tried father,

SAMUEL GOSSET.

Gosset had not been able to resist the temptation to have it both ways. He would receive his son kindly, but must first express his resentment against him. He would give way on all points, but would not allow Percy, or George, or the Rector to think that *they* had had anything to do with bringing him round to their views.

But that does not express all that was in his mind. The desire to do the right thing was still stronger in him than his inclination to domineer. That would be satisfied by this letter; had almost been so by the writing of it. He would show himself in a different light when he came to receive his son.

But how was his son to know that? And how was George, in the light of it, and of his past experience of Gosset, to take the letter written to him by the same post, of which he had said nothing to Percy?

DEAR MR. BARTON: I have come to the conclusion that under all circumstances it will be the best thing now for Percy to go to Canada, and as soon as possible. I should therefore wish to take the expenses of his going on myself. I do not know what arrangements you may have made in that respect, apart from me. I am not a rich man, and cannot afford to do more than pay his passage, provide him with a small outfit, and give him a few pounds to live on till he finds work; and that will not be very easy. But I should wish to do it, and if you will kindly render me an account of what you have already spent on him, if anything, I will send you a cheque for the amount.

Yours truly,

SAMUEL GOSSET.

It was Gosset's final effort to get his conscience clear, and had cost him a good deal. But George knew that he

was not mistaken in believing him to have thrown the onus of provision on to him, while pretending something else, and could not accept this letter at its face value. There must be something behind it, and he wanted time to think it over.

Nor on Gosset's having consulted Dr. Merrow on the whole question did he know what to think. That he had given him a fair account of all its details he found it difficult to believe, and he felt rather sad at the idea that he himself might have been represented in an unfavourable light. Dr. Merrow had not returned his call, and it looked as if he had no intention of doing so. It never occurred to him that Mrs. Merrow had represented his visit as anything but the obvious first step in opening up an acquaintance on his own account, still less that she might not view it in that light herself. He thought that there must be some reason for Dr. Merrow not wishing to know him; and it hurt him, because he did very much wish to know Dr. Merrow.

"I think you ought to go and see him," he said to Percy, rather envying him the opportunity. "I'm quite sure that, whatever he says to you, you won't be sorry afterwards."

"Well, I don't see it, Mr. Barton." He spoke respectfully, but firmly. He had altered much for the better in appearance, and had a look of purpose and determination on his face that had not been there before. "Dr. Merrow represents what I've made up my mind I'll have nothing more to do with. The sort of religion that has been poked down my throat all my life hasn't done me any good, and I can't see that it does anybody else any good. *You've* shown me what religion is, and I don't want to go back to the sort of talk I should get from a chapel minister. I've had enough of it. Half of it's cant, and I might be tempted to tell him so."

"I don't think you'd be tempted by Dr. Merrow to be

rude to him, Percy. Surely you can recognize a good man when you see him! You heard him preach that night in London. There was no cant there."

"I don't know that there was. It was a good sermon, though I've heard better. Still, I don't *want* to see Dr. Merrow. What does he want to see me about?"

"Go, and let him tell you himself. If you refuse to go it will look as if I were keeping you back. I don't want that."

Percy gave way instantly. "If *you* want me to go, Mr. Barton, of course I will. I'd do a good deal more than that if you asked me. I'll go now, and get it over."

George went out to think things over when he was alone. He refreshed himself by a short visit to the stable-yard, and then went into his kitchen garden, which was enclosed by an old brick wall, and where he often repaired for privacy. For he could think better out of doors, walking up and down between the spring flowers on either side of the broad middle path, than cooped up in a room.

It struck him as curious that Percy had apparently taken no particular impression from the sermon that had impressed him so much. He did not suppose that it was true that he had heard better sermons, in spite of the preachers of whom his denomination boasted. It seemed to him likely that his taste had been vitiated by sermons that were not really good, although they would generally be called so; but it was not worth while worrying about that. The point was that the boy was in revolt, not against religion—he had found him firm in the essentials of his faith, and determined to follow its light—but against everything non-essential in which he had been brought up. He could hardly be surprised at it. In George's position in Roding, he had come across little in connection with nonconformity but strife and petty jealousy. What there was of essential

Christianity amongst its adherents was retiring and unmarked. Gosset set the tone, and no one comparing it with the orderly contented spirit to which it was in opposition, could say that in its manifestation it was nearer to righteousness. George knew practically nothing about nonconformity at large. He could only judge it by what he saw of it in Roding. Nor had he been attracted towards it that evening at Dr. Merrow's chapel; he had only been attracted towards Dr. Merrow, and quite thought that he must be nearer in spirit to the good men in the Church than to those of his own fellowship.

Percy Gosset wanted to become a churchman. He wanted to be confirmed before he left the country. It was partly out of a wish to follow George himself, whom he admired and trusted above other men. But it was not all that. He knew less than George himself, from his reading, of the broad principles of nonconformity; he had only heard them stated in eternal wearisome opposition to those whose fruits he saw to be good. He knew Roding Chapel, and the little chapels in the villages round, and Briggs's Chapel; and he was sick of it all. He was going to a broader, healthier life, and it seemed to him indisputable that by relinquishing dissent for churchmanship he would be practising a broader, healthier religion. George thought so too, but he knew how bitter Gosset would be against him if he encouraged the boy in his wish, or even if it should be carried out without his encouragement.

"I can do nothing with the man," the Rector had said to him before he went away. "He can't see straight about anything. He says he washes his hands of the boy. Very well; take him at his word. He wants to marry the girl. I shall put up their banns, and if Gosset protests she can go to him later. He wants to be confirmed. A very good thing for him. Explain things to him, George, and when I

come back I'll see him too; and I'll talk to the Bishop. I'm sick to death of Gosset. You go ahead—with everything."

So George had gone ahead. But he wanted to be quite certain that he had done right.

After half-an-hour in the garden he could not see that he had done wrong, but he was as far as ever from divining what Gosset might have in his mind now. He got closest to it when he allowed himself to hope that Gosset's interview with Dr. Merrow had disposed him towards some right way of thinking. After further consideration he went indoors and wrote him the following letter in his large boyish hand:

DEAR MR. GOSSET: I am very glad that you can give your consent to Percy going to Canada. I think it is quite natural that you wish to pay for his passage, etc., yourself, but I hope you will not insist upon that. What I am doing is a great pleasure to me, and I have more money than I can spend on myself, and am very glad to find something like this that I can spend a little of it on. I have not mentioned to anybody that I am doing this little thing, and I have told Percy not to. It is quite between him and me, so I hope you will not refuse to give me this pleasure.

Yours truly,
G. BARTON.

He was not quite satisfied with this letter. It did not read very well. He always had a difficulty in expressing himself on paper. But it said what he meant, and he went out at once and posted it, on his way to the corn-merchant and the saddler, with both of whom he had a little business to transact.

In the meantime Percy had made his way across the fields to "The Limes."

He whistled as he went. He had thrown off the incubus of his unhappy unsuitable life, and was looking forward keenly to his new experiences. He was no longer in subjection, but a man with a man's work to do.

By-and-by he ceased whistling, and his face became graver. He had also a man's responsibilities, and they were of a sort that were sobering.

As he came near to "The Limes" his expression changed to one of some irritation. What was he going there for? To be talked to—in the old way—of repentance and pardon—perhaps to be prayed with. He had repented long ago. One couldn't be for ever dwelling on past faults. It was much better not to do so, when one had once made up one's mind to avoid them in future. And as for pardon—his hopeful clean frame of mind was the best indication he could have that his repentance was of the right sort and had been accepted. He would go through with it, because Mr. Barton had asked it of him. But in one thing he was determined. He would listen to no criticism of Mr. Barton whatever. He would make it quite plain that he regarded Mr. Barton as a shining light before which even the far-reaching brilliance of Dr. Merrow must pale itself. The one would talk; the other would do things for you. That was the sort of religion that he believed in now, and it would not do the great Dr. Merrow any harm to be told so—respectfully, of course, but in firm and unmistakable terms.

Dr. Merrow had told his wife what had happened between Gosset and himself, and asked that whenever Percy should come he should be taken straight up to see him. Instructions to that effect had been given to Mary, but it was unfortunate that on this particular morning Dr. Merrow should have been resting after a bad night, and the instructions could not be carried out to the letter.

Mrs. Merrow came down to him. She was sincerely anxious that her husband's wishes should be carried out, and that the young man should not merely be sent away with a request to come again. But she was also not averse to

seeing for herself what the young man was like, whose actions had caused such disturbance.

Perhaps the sort of interest he saw in her face, as she shook hands with *him*, strengthened Percy's determination to stand no nonsense of any sort; for when she said, "I am very sorry that Dr. Merrow is not up yet," he replied at once: "Then I won't trouble him, ma'am. I only came because I was told he wanted to see me."

She did not quite like the speech, and half-divined hostility behind it, but said: "Yes, he does want to see you, and it is unfortunate that you should have happened to come on the first morning that I have been obliged to keep him in bed. I think, if he is not actually asleep, he might like to see you in his room. If you will wait here for a minute I will go up and see if it is possible."

Percy took offence at her cold business-like manner. He was not going to stand in the position of one whom Dr. Merrow had a right to send for and lecture. He had not considered that if he came at all he must come with a good grace. He allowed his irritation at having been summoned to revive, and went back to the attitude he had taken up on receipt of his father's letter.

"I'll ask you not to disturb him, please, Mrs. Merrow," he said firmly. "It's not in the least necessary. I am sorry he is not so well. I don't wish to upset him further."

She looked at him in some surprise. The hostility, or at least the unwillingness, was plain enough now. "Would you like to fix a time to come this afternoon, when he will be up?" she asked; "or perhaps later in the morning?"

He looked down. He had promised George that he would see Dr. Merrow. If she had kept silent for a moment, he would have agreed to one of these proposals, however unwillingly.

But she was annoyed now by his attitude, which she did

not understand. "I don't want you to put yourself out at all," she said. "It is unfortunate that Dr. Merrow has had to keep his room this morning, but I'm afraid it cannot be helped. If you don't *want* to see him——!"

"Well, to tell you the plain truth, ma'am, I don't," he said, looking her in the face with an expression that she liked less than ever. "My father wrote to me that he had talked over my affairs with Dr. Merrow, and I was to come and talk to Dr. Merrow about them. At first I said I wouldn't come at all, but Mr. Barton said as my father wanted me to I'd better, and because *he* asked me—Mr. Barton, I mean—I came."

She felt violently antagonistic to him. How atrociously impertinent it was to talk in this way of her good husband, whose only desire it was to pour out the treasures of his warm heart upon this conceited bumptious young man, so little repentant for the gross wrong he had committed that he stood there as if he thought himself conferring an honour in coming at all!

But she knew so well her husband's way of dealing with this sort of spirit. It would not stand for a moment against his generous refusal to be offended by it. It would wither into shame before the pure, selfish, Christian love with which it would be met. Unless this young man was more than usually hardened, he would come away from her husband hating himself for the attitude in which he had gone to him. She would not do or say anything to prevent the meeting.

Unless he proved himself to be more than usually hardened. She did think it was her duty to preserve her husband from a painful interview, in his present state of health, if it should be made plain to her that it would do no good.

"I don't think you know Dr. Merrow," she said quietly. "Your father told him about his difficulties on your ac-

count, and asked for his advice, which was given, I understand on the lines that you wished to follow yourself. Dr. Merrow has so much sympathy with everybody who is in any trouble or difficulty, especially with young people, that he would only wish to see you to express that sympathy, and I am sure only if you wished to see him. He would be the last to want to interfere in any way with your plans, or to discuss anything that you did not want to discuss. He has come here as pastor to the church of which you are a member, and would like to make friends with you before you go away from us altogether, as I believe you are going. I am sure he would wish nothing more than that, and you will not find it difficult to make friends with him."

It was an heroic effort to sink her own feelings, and ought to have succeeded. It would have succeeded, but for her mention of the "church." She did not know he had determined to leave it. She had heard that he had been active in his membership, and thought it quite possible that he had been removed from it. But she would not hurt him by assuming that. He should be treated as amongst the most exemplary of Dr. Merrow's flock.

"Well, of course, that puts a different aspect on it, ma'am," he said, clinging, Gosset-like, to the advantage he thought he had gained. "I'm sure I should feel honoured by Dr. Merrow's friendship. But as for the chapel, I'm done with it altogether, and I think it better to say so plainly so as to save mistakes. I've found a friend such as I never had before in Mr. Barton, and he has shown me what religion ought to be, and I'm going to follow *him* now."

She still kept back the expression of her antagonism, which was becoming stronger every moment. "You mean, I suppose, that you are going to become a churchman," she said. "You are going to be confirmed."

She was unable to keep a trifle of impatience out of her voice. There were so many reasons why young people who had been brought up to dissent went over to "the Church," and so few of them would bear examination. They came to you and talked about this and that, as if they were actuated by nothing but a pure desire for increased spirituality, and in their infinite wisdom had made discoveries which you were too blind to see; and all the time you knew that there was some other motive at work—taste for ornament, a desire to feel themselves part of an old and picturesque institution, a sense of increased dignity, and more often than not a mere wish to escape some real or fancied social inferiority. In the last case they seldom had the art to hide their motive. They were already inclined to adopt an air of modest patronage, as from a churchman to a mere dissenter, even before they had put on their new garments. Probably, later on, they would come to look upon dissent and dissenters as beyond the pale of gentility altogether, and keep back the fact of their origin as if they had been bred in a workhouse. She thought she recognized the preliminary attitude of arrogance in this young grocer's son, who had been taken in hand by a church curate; and she could hardly conceal her contempt for it.

"Yes, I'm hoping to be confirmed before I go abroad," he said. "It isn't so much the doctrines as the spirit I like in the Church. They help you to live your life so as to make the best of it, and make yourself happy in what you do every day."

"To make the best of both worlds, in fact," she said, with a smile, restored almost to good humour by his crude air of great discoveries.

He was nettled at her smile. "Well, ma'am, I think that's a very good thing to do," he said, "though I know it's looked down upon by dissenters. It was all praying

and preaching in my life, and everything you did even in a healthy sort of way to amuse yourself was wrong. Now, I don't think it's wrong. Mr. Barton has shown me clearly that a person may throw himself into outdoor sports and games and not be any the worse for it in his religion, but all the better. Mr. Barton is the best man I've ever met, and it isn't all praying and preaching with him, the same as it is with most of our ministers."

If he bore it in mind whom he was addressing, this was nothing but impertinence. But still she would not drive him away if she could help it.

"I know that Mr. Barton has befriended you," she said, "and you are quite right to feel grateful to him. But there is no need to compare him with Dr. Merrow, who is a very much older man, with very much more experience. You may not find him in the least unsympathetic towards the ideas you have stated. They are not the property of the Church of England. *He* would certainly say that religion should be carried into every detail of daily life, even into its amusements. If you have a talk with him I am sure you will be glad afterwards that you did so. He is greatly beloved by young people who have the privilege of knowing him, and especially by young men. If he had not happened to be unwell you would have been taken straight up to to see him, and there are many who would give a good deal to have access to him in that way."

"Well, ma'am, as I said, I shall be glad to see Dr. Merrow when convenient. I dare say we shall understand each other. He won't expect me to hide what I think about things. It wouldn't be right. And as long as he doesn't try to keep me back from joining the Church, which I've now made up my mind to do, I'll listen to anything he's got to say.

It was too much for her. She saw the self-satisfied igno-

rant youth entering the revered presence with the determination to show himself as good as the man whose very humbleness of mind would render him defenceless before such an attitude. She saw him, encased in his stupid conceit, resisting the almost irresistible air of invitation that would be extended to him, mistaking sympathy with his crude youth for submission to his still cruder opinions, opposing platitudes to insight, arrogance to affection. She saw the beloved face take on an expression of distress as the conviction slowly dawned that it was all of no use—that this youth out of all those whom he had drawn to him was not to be drawn. And she saw him afterwards sorrowing at his failure, and trying to find causes in himself for it.

She would not have it. She would not have him subjected to such treatment; and having so decided she was free to express something of her own contempt for the attitude of semi-patronage the youth had presumed to adopt towards one of whom he should have been proud to be permitted to take counsel.

"I think you are forgetting yourself entirely," she said. "Dr. Merrow would not be likely to think your intention of joining the Church, as you call it, of as much importance as you evidently do, and would certainly not try to dissuade you from it in any way. And if you think so highly of yourself and your opinions as to propose to state them to him in the same way as you have to me, I think you had better not see him at all. He might not resent your unmannerliness—as I do—but he would be grieved by it, and I do not care to have him exposed to it."

His eyes fell. He had not intended to be unmannerly—only self-reliant and independent; but he recognised for the first time that Mrs. Merrow was not only a minister's wife but a lady of some consequence, according to the

standards he knew, and that he had spoken his mind to her pretty freely. But the recognition restored the self-reliance. He was no longer the son of a tradesman, obliged to speak with submissive respect to an actual or possible "good customer." He was going to a free country, where such conventions would be swept away, and he would be as good as anybody, or at least not forbidden to consider himself so.

"I never had it in my mind to be rude to Dr. Merrow," he said. "I hope I know what's due to myself better than that. And if I have spoken my mind to you, ma'am, in a way you don't like, I'm sorry for it, but I've a right to my own opinions. More than that wasn't meant."

"Your opinions are not of much importance," she said, "but your way of expressing them is, under the circumstances. I think I need not keep you any longer."

She turned towards the back part of the room—they had been standing by the dining-table—and he was left to make his way out unaided, which he did, with an uneasy feeling that he had put his foot in it now.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECTOR AND DR. MERROW

"GOOD AFTERNOON! Do you think I can see Dr. Merrow?"

Mary had opened the front door to find the Rector standing, upright, important, and genial, under the "'and-some portico." It was Sunday afternoon, a little before five o'clock.

The apparition put her into a slight fluster, not unpleasurable. It recalled early days, and it was nice to be greeted with that preliminary "Good afternoon," delivered as to one who had a personal claim to notice, and was not merely part of the machinery of entrance, like the bell and the door-scraper.

"I don't know, sir. If you'll kindly step in, I will tell Mrs. Merrow."

The Rector followed her into the drawing-room. "Yes, that will be the best way," he said. "Tell Mrs. Merrow. Say I'm just here for the Sunday. I came last night and am leaving early to-morrow morning, but I didn't want to be in Roding without coming to look in on them. Tell her that, will you?"

He thought it as well to be explicit. George's visit seemed somehow to have missed fire,—he did not quite understand how.

"Yes, sir." She was drawing up the blinds.

"Were you with Mrs. Merrow in London?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I've been with Dr. and Mrs. Merrow just upon seventeen years, in the same house."

"Ah! you'll find it a change coming into the country. But I hope you will like the change."

"I was brought up in the country, sir. It's like coming back 'ome."

She beamed on him, respectfully, and went out. There was nobody quite like "the master," of course, and she looked upon "the Establishment" as unenlightened, and on the whole a bar to religious progress; but the clergy, especially the country clergy, if they came from the higher sort of gentry, did have a nice way with people, there was no denying it. It was part of the coming back 'ome to be in contact with it once more.

Dr. and Mrs. Merrow came in together. "How do you do," said the Rector, shaking hands with them in turn. "This is a very informal visit. My wife won't be back for a fortnight. When she does come we'll have everything in order. But I didn't want to be in Roding without just calling in to give you a welcome."

"Mr. French will like a cup of tea, my dear," said Dr. Merrow. "Shall we take him into the other room?"

They moved across to the dining-room, the Rector talking most of the time, about the house, the views, and the spring weather. His full voice was in some contrast to Dr. Merrow's rather low utterance, and his look of health and vigour made the other appear more frail than he now was in reality; for he had picked up his strength since he had been in Roding, and only some constitutional weakness remained.

"You must take this visit on behalf of my brother, too," said the Rector, as they sat down at the table. "He was going to Spain when I left him, and goodness knows when he will be back again. He told me to say that if you would like to use the gardens at the Court, they will be always open to you. They are lovely just now. I don't

know how he can go away and leave them as much as he does."

Mrs. Merrow thought it all a little pompous and patronising, though there was no doubt that it was kindly meant. She was so jealous for her husband that she disliked any one taking the lead in conversation when he was there, unless they were men of admitted and outstanding achievement, whom he would be glad to listen to. This portly handsome cleric was not of that order. His air of taking the lead, as of right, came only from his consciousness of rank, although he was obviously too much of a gentleman intentionally to protrude it.

But Dr. Merrow was pleased with his friendliness. He knew quite well how the rector of a parish such as Roding, who had had it, as he had said, all his own way, would be likely to regard the advent of a man who would be in some sense his rival, and from whom he might fear opposition that he had not yet had to face. His attitude showed that he had postponed those fears until they should be realised, and for his part would leave nothing undone that would show him desirous of living in peace and friendliness.

And he was inclined to like him too, as he was inclined to like most men, if they would only let him. He admired his robust virility, handsome appearance, and assured address, as generous natures do admire qualities in others which they cannot claim for themselves. His life had not been much concerned with such men, but they were a notable part of the great brotherhood of mankind, at least as it existed in England, and he thought it very likely that he might learn a good deal from the Rector of Roding, if they were to meet on the friendly terms held out.

"We have passed those beautiful gardens in our drives," he said, "and admired them. It will be a great pleasure

to be allowed to wander through them. We were too timid to face a big garden for ourselves, Londoners as we are, and knowing so little about it. But we have thought once or twice that we may have made a mistake. There was a sweet old house we might have had in a village in Surrey, where I should have been allowed to take the services in the chapel. But we chose this as being more what we were accustomed to."

"It was my doing," said Mrs. Merrow. "I understand a house like this. My son, who came to see it with us, says it is a terrible production for the country, and wanted us to take the other. It was certainly attractive, but the rooms were low, and I didn't know whether we should really like it or not."

"Well, I'm glad you chose this one," said the Rector. "I think your son was at Cambridge with my boy, Ralph, and George Barton."

"I didn't know that," said Dr. Merrow. "Were they friends? But I don't think he knew, either, when he came down here."

"I believe they didn't know each other. Of course, *he* was known, as he was President of the Union, Ralph told me. But neither Ralph nor George belonged to it, or went in for anything so serious as politics up there."

"I suppose not," was Mrs. Merrow's inward comment.

"However, Ralph thinks about little else but politics now," the Rector went on. "He's taking up the housing question in London—full of committees and societies, and all that sort of thing. We don't see much of him down here, but when your son comes I hope they will meet some time or other. What is he doing, may I ask?"

"He is at the bar," said Dr. Merrow, "but also spends most of his time working at social questions. He is hoping to get into Parliament at the next election. He has been

what he calls nursing a constituency—East Beechshire—for the last year or so.”

“Oh, really? That’s interesting,” said the Rector. “Ralph is also nursing a constituency—Notting Green—but I’m afraid he hasn’t much hope of winning. He’s just trying his wings. Well, the two of them will have something to talk about together. I hope they’ll meet.”

When tea was over, Mrs. Merrow left the two men together. The Rector looked at his watch. “Can you spare me a quarter of an hour?” he asked. “There is something I rather want to talk to you about.”

Dr. Merrow could. He had not yet begun to go out in the evening.

“It’s about young Gosset,” said the Rector, coming at once to the point.

A shade came over Dr. Merrow’s face. “Yes,” he said.

“I believe you have heard his story. His father didn’t behave well about it. He made great mistakes in his treatment of him, and the boy would have run off, and might have gone to the bad altogether, if George Barton hadn’t interested himself in him.”

“I didn’t quite understand that,” said Dr. Merrow. “I knew he was unhappy living in London, and wanted to go off to Canada, which his father wouldn’t listen to at first, but has consented to now.”

The Rector smiled. “There are two sides to every question,” he said. “Gosset wouldn’t be likely to tell you that the boy was on the point of running away; but George Barton told him so, and he thanked him for stopping it.”

Dr. Merrow said nothing.

“Well, that’s turned out all right, fortunately. It was obviously the best thing under the circumstances, and Gosset was wise to consent to it. It isn’t what I wanted to speak

to you about. You won't misunderstand me, I hope, when I say that Gosset, no doubt with the best intentions in the world, tried to fit his boy into a groove that he wasn't suited for. If he'd let him have a little more freedom, to do what other youngsters of his age do, I believe he wouldn't have gone wrong, as he did. The result of it has been, to put it shortly, that he took a dislike to the forms of religion he had been brought up in. I needn't say—or perhaps I had better say, as you don't know me—that I personally had nothing to do with it; and George Barton had nothing to do with it. I mean in the way of advising him to leave you and come to us, as he has made up his mind to do. We are very careful not to act in that way, or even to appear to be so acting. If you had been here, or he had been a member of your congregation, I should not have consented to do anything for him without talking to you about it first; for my own sake, I should not even have wanted it to take place: it would have made bad blood with his father, for one thing, and I like to live at peace with my neighbours. I should actually have discouraged him, unless I had seen very plainly that he knew what he was doing, and had good reasons for it. I wanted to assure you of this. We shall be living side by side, and working side by side, and I am rather sorry that this has come at the very beginning, and don't want you to think that I am the sort of person to wish to draw your people away from you."

Dr. Merrow's face had not lightened during the course of this speech; but he said at once: "It is kind of you to come and say that. I have had it in my mind that I might say something of the sort to you, if I found an opportunity, and could do so without offence. I find myself caring less and less as the years pass, and I learn my successive lessons, where people go to, to satisfy the thirst that is in

them. I should be blind to the truth if I did not see God's Holy Spirit working even through what I believe to be error; and as for the differences between you and me, I believe them to be very small. But as for this young man, Mr. French, I cannot feel altogether happy. He is going away. If he can get nearer to God by means of another form of worship than ours, then by all means let him take his step forward, and do you help him towards it. If I had been able to see him, I should have said nothing to dissuade him, if I had seen that his purpose was fixed and his motives pure. But I think I should have tried to satisfy myself that he had taken into account his father's feelings in the matter, and, from what I can learn, I am not sure that I should have been able so to satisfy myself."

The Rector hesitated, but only for a moment. "It is a little difficult for me to speak quite plainly," he said, in his full, confident voice. "Gosset has his good points; I am not going to deny them. But nobody who knows him, as I do, having lived in the same place all my life, could say that one of them was the spirit of tolerance that you and I are anxious to exercise towards one another. I have never actually quarrelled with him, but that is certainly not because he has made it easy not to do so. I have done my very best from the very beginning to help him over this matter of his son, and in fact have laid myself open to some criticism on it, in which he has done nothing to defend me, although he was more than ready to act in the way I first advised."

"I am so glad," said Dr. Merrow gently, "that that part of the question is happily settled. May God's blessing rest on it. It was difficult to see light. But Gosset has told me how much is owing to the tender care that your dear lady of mercy gave to the poor sinning girl, and what it had made of her."

The Rector's face changed completely. "Did Gosset tell you that?" he asked.

"Yes. He spoke warmly of her goodness and sympathy. They had been brought to bear upon him and his own wife, when they were in trouble. These gracious acts are not forgotten."

The Rector was moved, both by Dr. Merrow's way of referring to his wife, and the proof that she had been able to make her influence felt over Gosset. "I am very glad to hear that," he said in a lower voice. "My wife *has* got a wonderful way of making her true kind nature felt. It has almost worked a miracle with that girl. I feel no mis-giving now about a marriage, although I was against it at first. But, my dear Dr. Merrow, how is one to take a man like Gosset? He is now reconciled to the marriage, I understand. It is actually to take place with his full consent. And yet, when I broached the possibility of it to him—take my word for it, with the utmost care to avoid all offence—he was—well, impossible; there's no other word for it. I know that you gave him the same advice later, and that that probably disposed him towards it. No doubt it did. He would listen to you when he wouldn't listen to me, and I'm not grumbling at that. But there are questions in connection with this affair in which I have to *act*. There's the boy himself. He is headstrong—more so than I had thought. I didn't know much of him. I suppose it's the Gosset breed coming out. Gosset told me he had washed his hands of him. It was his own phrase. He said it again and again—to me. And he had said it to George Barton—about Canada—and let a fortnight go by without communicating with his son, though he had promised to go up and see him. One took him at his word, and did one's best for the boy. At least, *I* have had very little to do with it. It is George who has taken him in hand. I said

I would see him about his confirmation, and make arrangements for it, as part of his general change of existence. And now Gosset turns round and says that things are being done which he doesn't approve of. I dare say they are; but they wouldn't have been if he had behaved himself. You can't treat a man like that as a reasonable human being."

"You throw a new light on our friend Gosset," said Dr. Merrow, rather unwillingly. "I can only speak of him as I find him. It was a big thing for him to bring himself to consent to this marriage. I feel that,—in his position here—if he was justified in speaking as he did of the parentage of the girl his son is to marry."

"He was probably justified in anything he may have said, from his point of view. Morton is a rough-tongued working-man, of the sort who likes to have a handle against religion. He would have brought this up against Gosset all his life, and the child would have been here in Roding to point his attacks. You have to remember, Dr. Merrow, that Gosset is removing a standing disgrace to his name in consenting to this marriage. He is now taking a high line about it—it is the right thing to do, whatever it may cost him, and so on. But he gets all three of them out of the country, all the same. He didn't talk about doing his duty, whatever it might cost him, when Morton interviewed him in my presence. He talked in a very different style. Although I didn't want the marriage then, and said so, the things Gosset said, and the way he looked at it, disgusted me. And as I told you, he took exactly the same line two or three weeks ago. No doubt you helped him towards a better attitude, but one really can't take the professions of a man who acts as he does without a grain of salt; and to come back to where we started, I cannot in conscience feel that he has the right to direct his son's actions any further; and if the boy has made up his mind, from not unworthy

motives—as I think he has—to take this step of joining our Church, I do not feel myself called upon to take what you must admit would be an action on my part needing a very convincing cause—of refusing to accept him, because of what Gosset might think, or say, about it. I do care what *you* might think, and am anxious not to be misunderstood.”

Dr. Merrow looked distressed. Here again was a question with which he felt himself unfitted to cope. It had nothing to do with deep and vital truths; it was much more in the nature of an unpleasant wrangle. Although the Rector had spoken with straightforward and reasonable advocacy of his cause, it was plain that his irritation against Gosset was strong. And Gosset, although he had referred once or twice to the Rector in a way that Dr. Merrow had deprecated, had not actually shown the same degree of irritation. Dr. Merrow had pierced through to whatever there was of good in him, and was unwilling to judge him as different from what he had shown himself under his own reconciling influence.

“It is all very painful,” he said. “I must believe that the poor man has not borne himself in all respects as he should, under the disturbing experiences he has been through. But there is good in him, Mr. French, a great deal of good. I have found it there, and thanked God for it. May we not hope, now that difficulties are working themselves out to their end, that the good will largely prevail? Oh, I hope so!”

The Rector thought he knew his Gosset, and had no such hope. His irritation divided itself into three streams. The larger was still directed against the impossible Gosset. One of the lesser was against himself. He had allowed himself to speak more freely than he had had any intention of doing when he began. He and Dr. Merrow were gentlemen, with a gentleman’s educated standard of behaviour,

and Gosset was—well, Gosset; and his behaviour was indefensible. The men of breeding would stand together against the man of none. But he ought to have remembered that Gosset was Dr. Merrow's chief supporter, and that even if he thought him blameworthy, he might find a difficulty in saying so. Also that the fellow was cunning enough to have represented himself in the best light before his minister, and to have taken him in.

But he also felt irritation against Dr. Merrow himself. Dr. Merrow ought to have been able to see that unless he, the Rector, was actually lying, Gosset had behaved badly; he ought to have been able to see through mere cant and time-serving. Besides, there was a little too much of the peacemaker—who takes his stand on a consciously superior level—about his last speech. The Rector had had no intention of pleading his case against Gosset before Dr. Merrow sitting as an assessor, and did not like to be told, as he supposed himself to have been, that there were faults on both sides, and he was making an unnecessary fuss about a small matter. And he thought that there was rather too much self-conscious piety in Dr. Merrow's habit of speech. He had said he had thanked God for the good he had found in Gosset. Had he really done that? He had interspersed his speech with phrases and expressions that men of their cloth did not commonly use towards one another, unless they were talking of deep matters. It was the trick of the sanctimonious dissenter, acting up to his professions.

"The difficulties are not working themselves out," he said, "if Gosset is preparing to raise trouble about his son being confirmed. My conscience is quite clear on the matter. The boy is very nearly of age, he has a right to choose for himself on such matters, and he has chosen. He can settle it with his father, himself. The trouble that Gosset will try to raise will be between you and me, at the outset

of your residence here; and I don't want that. If you will be a little watchful with him, I think you will come to see that it was necessary that I should speak plainly in order to avoid it."

"There can be no trouble between us," said Dr. Merrow, "now that you have shown me so kindly that we may talk freely together. I should not take the word of another over anything which might lead to misunderstanding; I should come to you."

"I hope you always will," said the Rector, mollified. "The sort of thing that is happening now is very rare with us, and I am sorry it has come just at the beginning. Even Gosset and I manage to live in peace and good-will—at least on my part—as a general rule, although I believe his idea is that most of my work here is done with a suspicious dread of what he may think of it. There will be none of that feeling between you and me, and I am glad you have come here. I think you have, already, exercised a mollifying influence over our Gosset, and when this tiresome business is all cleared away, we shall find ourselves in an agreeable calm, which I hope will last."

He spoke the last sentence standing up, with a smile on his face, and now held his hand out in farewell.

Dr. Merrow rose too, more slowly. "I am still in a little difficulty," he said. "After what you have said, I think I must tell Gosset that I cannot interfere in what his son has decided for himself. I wanted to make friends with the son, and he did come to see me—rather, I am afraid, under protest. That has troubled me. I was unwell on the morning he came, and Mrs. Merrow saw him, and gathered, unwillingly, that an interview would not be likely to be productive of much good to him, and thought that it might be painful to me. So I was not able to see what way I might be able to make with him for myself. The oppor-

tunity is lost now. But I should like to be able to assure Gosset. He was disappointed at the lad not seeing me. His idea was that—that——”

“That we had kept him back from doing so, I suppose. That would be his idea. There you have your Gosset, Dr. Merrow. I can only tell you that it was George Barton who told him to come, when for some nonsensical reason of his own—mistaken loyalty, I suppose—he had said that he wouldn’t.”

Dr. Merrow knew this; his wife had told him what had been said. But it left a lot unexplained. A good many reasons might have actuated the advice, and still left this young curate under the onus of having so dealt with the boy and his ideas as to have practically encouraged him in his attitude of irreconcilable revolt. But it was difficult to say this to the Rector. It was rather difficult to say anything to him; he said so much, and at such length, himself. It was clear, at least, that he himself would not have encouraged the boy in his antagonism, and that must be enough. He could tell Gosset so with a clear conscience.

He accompanied the Rector to the door, and they parted with friendly words.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME CONCLUSIONS

THE RECTOR was staying for the two nights he was in Roding with George. Percy Gosset had gone back to his father's house, where the reconciliation, largely owing to his mother's influence, was more complete than might have been supposed. He had been in church that evening, and Gosset had accepted his going there with unusual meekness. The boy had held his own. The attitude which had struck Mrs. Merrow as so offensive had been effective with his father, who, like many disputatious men, had intervals of enervation, in which he ran away from all discussion, and exhibited a mild and yielding temper. But he only showed this quality to those who "stood up to him," and Percy had stood up to him from the time of receiving his letter, and only consented to spend his last week or two under the paternal roof if his right to independent action were recognised. Gosset had complained to Dr. Merrow about his intentions, but he had said little to his son, and was prepared to accept them as he had accepted all the rest. He was tired of the fray, and wanted it ended.

The Rector and George walked home together after church. The evening light was still in the sky, and as they walked down the High Street together, they saw Miss Budd at her dining-room window, looking up and down the street. A few weeks before she would have allowed herself to be noticed, and indeed insisted upon it; but now she turned away as they came within view, and it was still light enough to see that she tossed her head as she did so.

"By-the-by, I have made a dreadful discovery," said the Rector. "When I went over the house this morning I discovered a dirty envelope addressed to Miss Budd in Sylvia's writing. It was one of those envelopes that they used for sending out invitations to the ball, and I've not the slightest doubt that it contains Miss Budd's card. It must have fallen down behind something, and lain there ever since."

"Then that accounts for her not going," said George.

"I'm afraid it does," said the Rector with a laugh. "You always put things in a very clear light, my dear George. And I'm inclined to think it accounts for a good many things. I never quite understood why she should have taken such violent offence against us. Your cousin and I spoke to her plainly, but she is not the sort of woman to throw us over for that, and I have been quite expecting her to make advances before this. Now I think it is pretty plain that she was already offended with us before she came that evening, and of course, if there had been nothing else, she would have been vastly annoyed at being left out of a thing like that if she thought it had been done on purpose. Here's a pretty coil! What's to be done now?"

"But Mrs. Stenning told me, now I remember, that she had had to refuse at the last moment, on account of rheumatism or something, and it was a great disappointment to her, although she said she hadn't much wanted to go."

"Did she? Well, perhaps Sylvia knew she had lost this card and sent her another one. But, no, I don't think so. I remember her saying that Miss Budd hadn't answered, and we took it as being intended to mark her sense of our unworthiness. Very likely she wouldn't like Mrs. Stenning to know that she hadn't been invited. Poor thing!

I'm afraid she must have suffered a great deal. She likes to be in everything that is going on. I can't help wishing it hadn't happened, and just at that particular time."

"Shall you explain to her what's happened?"

"Well, I don't know. I shan't. We'll see what your Cousin Ruth thinks about it. I should be inclined to leave it alone. She has behaved quite rudely ever since, and has certainly gone into partnership, so to speak, with Mrs. Morton, to try and score a point off us. Oh, my dear George, what a burden that whole business has been! And what a lot of harm spite and jealousy can accomplish. Here are Gosset and Miss Budd, both making more than usual professions of religion, and neither of them can act in a simple matter of honesty and good feeling as you'd expect of a sensible person who made no professions at all. It sometimes makes me wonder what's the good of it all; for it's always happening. I think it's the greatest trial to one's faith that there is,—how so many people can fulfil all the rules laid down, and yet apparently get no good from it whatever."

"I suppose one learns, as one goes on, that it isn't a question of fulfilling rules."

"I mean more than a mechanical fulfilment of rules. There's Miss Budd comes regularly to the altar. Why? She knows it's the means of receiving spiritual grace. One is bound to believe that that is why she comes. And she is too well instructed not to make an examination of herself before she comes. If she does that honestly, as she knows equally well that she must, we believe that she will gain the grace she comes for. But does she? She goes away as much at enmity with us, for instance, as ever. She intrigues against us. She lets her spite rule her."

"If she doesn't confess and repent of a bad spirit, before she comes, it would be because she doesn't realise that she

has it. She would deceive herself in what she does, thinking she was acting from good motives.

"No doubt she does grossly deceive herself in that way, or she certainly couldn't come at all, believing what she does. But then one asks, if the motive is right, might one not expect that the grace would not be denied, but would show itself in illuminating the mistake—would work in the spirit, so that the wrong—the sin—that the recipient was blind to, would, perhaps gradually, be made plain? That's the problem, dear George. We believe that the grace is something outside of ourselves. We ought not to be satisfied with the belief that only just so far as a sinner sees his own sins he gets grace to correct them."

"It seems to me," said George, looking out over the broad stretch of quiet twilight country, to which they had now come, "that the doctrine of conversion—of a real change of heart—is the only one that meets the case. After that the sacrament *is* a food that nourishes the soul."

The Rector seemed to have only half listened to him. "Well, there's Gosset," he said, "who would certainly claim to have experienced conversion. He also follows his rule,—on occasions. I can't honestly say more than that, for one is bound to judge a man by the light he shows, and for once that one has known him do a conscientious thing, like that giving up his license—possibly, to some extent, in his accepting this marriage—one has known him do a dozen things that an honourable straightforward man of the world wouldn't do. This talk of 'vital religion' that's always on his lips—he means something by it. He means that he claims to put himself in closer relation with God than he thinks the ordinary churchgoer does when he comes and repeats prayers twice a Sunday. He thinks he does that; any mental effort he makes is made to that end, unless he's an absolute hypocrite, which he

isn't. But where's the leading—the guidance? Are we to believe that it really shows itself in making him give up selling wines and spirits, which nobody will drink less of because they have to go to Barrow for them instead of him, and hides itself in much more real things. We know what the fruits of the Spirit are. They're much higher than any action that arises out of a mere opinion, even if it is an action of some degree of self-sacrifice. Mightn't we expect that they would show themselves, as a result of putting one's self honestly in connection with the Holy Spirit, however blind one might be? But—love, peace, long-suffering, gentleness!—one wouldn't expect them from Gosset. Well, here we are! It's a puzzle, George. We've got to see that *we* don't make the same mistakes, at any rate."

George was anxious to hear how the Rector had got on with Dr. Merrow, and how he had been struck by him. The information came while they were at supper.

"Well, I saw Dr. Merrow. I think I opened his eyes a little for him. I don't want to make mischief between him and Gosset, but as he has come just at the time when we are unfortunately mixed up with Gosset, it is imperative that he shouldn't be allowed to take his opinion of us from him. I told him exactly how matters had gone, and the end of it was that he seemed satisfied to leave it alone."

"You mean about Percy being confirmed?"

"Yes. He's a broad-minded man, George, for a Dissenter, though a little tinged with their unnatural phraseology. I assured him that we didn't make a habit of getting the young Dissenters over to us, and I think he'll take the hint and leave *us* alone. In fact, he said as much. Of course, people will go and hear him preach. I don't mind that. But I doubt whether he'll make much more difference to us than old Thomson did in the long run. He'll be over their heads."

"He wasn't over people's heads when I heard him," said George, vaguely disappointed at the evident absence of impression made upon the Rector by his visit. "He was as simple as possible in his language, and in what he preached about."

"Well, that sort of simplicity is above most people's heads. I don't deny it to him, after what I've read of his. It is a high quality, and would come home to you and me. But to Gosset and people like that it wouldn't seem much. That Welsh humbug they got down a year or two ago—that's the sort of thing they like. If Merrow had been that sort of preacher I think he *would* have drawn people away from us, and given us trouble in other ways beside. I'm very glad he isn't. There didn't seem to me to be any fewer people in church this morning than usual. What about last Sunday?"

"About the same. Do you think Merrow thinks that I acted in any way I shouldn't have done about Percy?"

"Oh, no! I think he is quite satisfied now that we have done nothing more than we were entitled to do. After all, there's a limit to one's toleration, or whatever you like to call it. We do believe that we are right and they are wrong. We shouldn't be justified in refusing to accept any one who wanted to come over to us, only for the sake of avoiding offence. It would be the same for them; and of course Gosset has actually put pressure on people before now. Merrow won't do that; he's too much of a gentleman."

"Did he say anything about coming to see me? I called on him, you know, nearly a fortnight ago."

"Oh, he'll come, all right. He hasn't been well. His wife seems to look after him very carefully. I wasn't very much taken with her, but I should think she's a good sort of woman. I'm afraid she won't have much in common

with your Cousin Ruth, though. I shouldn't wonder if we didn't almost forget they were there after a bit. We shall do all that's necessary to show that we want to be friendly, but their life is so different from ours that there's not likely to be any close friendship. By-the-by, they told me about their son. He's putting up for Parliament, too—as a Radical, no doubt, though they didn't say so. A county constituency, too, and hopes to get in. Seems odd, doesn't it, that Ralph should be trying for a seat in London, and this young fellow, who, I suppose, has lived in London all his life, should be hoping to represent an agricultural constituency? It shows the topsy-turveydom of politics nowadays. He will probably be a good deal more advanced than his father, and we shall have to look out for ourselves when he comes down here. The whole thing is a little bit of a bore, George. I suppose it's a good thing for us to be shaken up a bit sometimes; but we were really getting on very well."

A week or two later Percy Gosset was quietly married to Jane Morton, very early one morning in Roding Church. Morton, becomingly subdued to the occasion, gave his daughter away. He had consented to do this if he was not required to meet Gosset, for whom he still expressed a scathing contempt; and as Gosset had had no wish to be present, the matter had been easily arranged. Mrs. Gosset, a gentle meek-looking woman, was there, crying softly to herself throughout the service. Lady Ruth was beside her, and cried a little, too. Otherwise the church was almost empty. It was known that the Rector would object to people coming merely out of curiosity, and there were few to be found in Roding willing to brave the look he would have given them for disregarding his wishes.

It was rather a sad little service. The poor young bride, her fresh country girlhood already changed to the pathetic

look of coming motherhood, was pale and serious. Lady Ruth kissed her afterwards, and she broke down and clung to her, and not to her own mother, who was resplendent in a new bonnet. Mrs. Gosset kissed her, too, and she told her that she would try to be a good wife and mother.

Percy Gosset sailed on the same day for Canada. She was to follow him in six months' time, with their child.

CHAPTER XX

CHARLES MERROW

ONE afternoon in July, when the country round Roding was beginning to take on its rather monotonous dress of summer greenery, which it would wear until the autumn touched its embosomed woods with gold and russet, Charles Merrow got out of the London train and drove to "The Limes," with luggage enough to indicate that he was going to make something of a stay. It was his first visit since Dr. and Mrs. Merrow had settled there. He had been spending his time in Germany, looking into all sorts of questions, social and political, and not disdaining the lighter aspects of travel.

He was a fortunate young man. His mother's money, which would be his some day, while not running into the figures sometimes whispered in confidence by Gosset, was ample enough to relieve him of the necessity of keeping his nose to the grindstone of a profession; and since his tastes ran to pursuits in which he could not be said to be wasting his time, enough of it had been at his service since he had taken his degree and been called to the bar to enable him to go where he liked in the world, and to do what he liked.

He was fortunate in other ways. He had brains above the ordinary, and willingness to use them. He had something of his father's idealism, but it was tempered by a good deal of his mother's hard-headed rationality; he had her sound physical health, too, but his energy was not so restless. The amiability of his expression, which gave significance to features neither handsome nor plain, was

nature's adaptation to a character less rarely conceived of the peculiar kind of piercing sweetness that was sometimes seen on Dr. Merrow's face; but it was difficult to find the source in either parent of the humour that lurked about Charles Merrow's eyes and mouth; for Mrs. Merrow was devoid of it, and her husband's humour was of a childlike kind that showed happiness, perhaps, but would not have availed towards lightening any times of stress.

Charles Merrow's attitude towards the world around him appeared to be one of amused tolerance, rather rare in one of his years, which numbered seven and twenty. Behind it were convictions of some force, which found expression in his speeches and writings. But he could never disguise his liking for mankind at large, even when represented by his political opponents. No doubt he inherited this trait from his father; but it was of a different quality. Dr. Merrow loved his fellow-humans because he saw something divine in each one of them. His son hardly saw that, but found most of them likeable. It followed, therefore, that he was very generally liked himself.

His life, except for its background, was very much like that of Ralph French. It is a truism to say that money is a great social solvent, but in the case of a young man of good address and conventional education it seems capable of breaking down almost all barriers, even a little of it. Dr. Merrow was the son of a poor nonconformist minister, and had gained his education by his own efforts. His grandfather was a shadowy figure, of a social status probably not higher than that of Gosset. Mrs. Merrow's ancestry was hardly more definite. She came of people engaged, as far back as they were known, which was not very far, in commerce, who had died without leaving any mark behind them, but occasionally a little money. Her father had

turned a small business into a large one, and left a good deal of money. Otherwise his life had been of no more significance than that of his forbears.

Compare Charles Merrow's ancestry with that of Ralph French. On his mother's side Ralph had behind him generation after generation of men and women who had played a leading part in their world, some of whom had risen to eminence, perhaps most of whom had at least left behind them some sign of their having existed; which, if you go back a few years beyond living memory, is a sufficiently rare thing in itself. On his father's side, besides a few tentacles stretching back and branching out in the same way, arising from such marriages as the Rector had made, there were two centuries of wealth and station, which had preserved at least a name, and usually a character, to each unit of which the successive generations had been composed. By the accident of his uncle being unmarried, Ralph enjoyed already some of the solid advantages of an assured place in the world. But for that, it is difficult to see where the fact of conspicuous descent helped him against the fortuitous combination of brains and a sufficiency of money as represented by Charles Merrow. The prizes for which both of them were running were as attainable by the one as by the other. Even the lesser rewards, to be enjoyed in the meantime—opportunities for social intercourse, sport, travel, art—were almost equal. There are none of these nowadays that a young man of attractive personality and an adequate income cannot enjoy. Charles Merrow was sociably inclined, and had invitations in plenty. There were no big houses of his relations to go to, as there were in Ralph's case; but there were plenty of others. If they had been guests at one of them together, they would have been there on equal terms; except that Ralph might not have been discouraged from making love to one of the daughters of

the house, and if Charles had done so he would probably not have been asked again.

Tea was set under the big limes in the garden. That itch for improvement which is aroused by the possession of a house in the country had so far affected Dr. and Mrs. Merrow that they had had a large square of ground levelled and floored with brick, and a garden house erected; and here Dr. Merrow encamped himself with books and papers whenever the weather invited him.

"Why, father, you're looking better than I've ever known you to look before," his son said to him.

"I am a great deal better, dear Charles," he said. "It is the country air, and the quiet. I think that if we had gone to live in the country within reach of London a few years ago I shouldn't have had to give up work."

"You wouldn't have been able to take it so quietly as you do here," said Mrs. Merrow. "I am glad we made the complete change. It has given us everything we could have hoped from it."

"And you, mother? You really like burying yourself in the country?"

She laughed. "I am quite happy," she said. "There is more to be said for it than I thought."

"We mustn't say that we are buried," said Dr. Merrow. "We have more people living about us than we could possibly get to know if we lived in Roding for a lifetime. One gets to know them better, too, than one's neighbours in London."

"Well, now, tell me who there is. I'm glad you've made friends. You ask me about French. I didn't know him at Cambridge. I looked him up and found he was a freshman when I was in my third year. But I think I just remember him; he was rather a good oar, and rowed in

Trials the term after I went down. What are the rectory people like?"

There was the slightest pause. "We don't see a great deal of them," said Mrs. Merrow. "Lady Ruth French called on me, and I called on her. They asked us to dine, but your father was not going out in the evenings then, and we had to refuse. She has been a great deal in London since then, with her daughter, but I believe they are both of them at home again now."

"You didn't like her, mother," said Charles with an accusing smile.

"My dear boy," she said, "it isn't a question of liking or non-liking; we have absolutely nothing in common. She is a lady of fashion—very pretty, very charming, and I—well, I'm not a lady of fashion."

"Then you didn't get on with her, mother. I can see quite well that you didn't get on with her."

"I didn't try very hard. I think *she* tried. She was as nice as possible. When you say I don't like her, that isn't true. But, you see, we haven't come down here to mix ourselves up with the county people and their amusements. We should look rather foolish, in our position, if we tried to do anything of the sort, and of course we don't want to, in the least. We want to be quiet and go on with as much of our work as we can."

"Oh, yes, I know. But you don't want to cut yourself off from people entirely."

"You see," she went on, "it is not as if Lady Ruth were the ordinary clergyman's wife, interested in her husband's work, and busying herself about it. In that case we might have had something to talk about, and there might have been things we could have done together—if she had wished it, of course; the suggestion wouldn't have come from me. But she seems to think it is rather amusing that she should

be a clergyman's wife at all. She laughed when I asked her if she had a district, and said that she had tried visiting when she was first married, but that she didn't know what to say to the people and they were always taking her in; so her husband stopped her, and she had been much happier ever since."

Dr. Merrow laughed. "She can't do her visiting to order," he said. "But she does visit her friends amongst the poor; and they like to see her. I haven't met Lady Ruth yet. I want to. My own dear people have nothing but affection and admiration for her. Your mother admires her as much as anybody, but she cannot quite approve of her apparent lack of seriousness."

Mrs. Merrow looked vexed for a moment, and then laughed, too. "I said that she was a very attractive woman, and I meant it," she said. "If I were a poor person in Roding, it would give me a good deal more pleasure to see Lady Ruth coming in at the door with her pretty clothes than to see—myself, for instance. But I'm not a poor person. If we meet at all, it has to be on equal terms, and as neither of us is in the least interested in what chiefly interests the other—well, we shall meet occasionally and be friendly when we meet, but there it is likely to end."

Charles accepted this for the moment, with reservations. He was very fond of his mother, who had always treated him with a large generosity, both mentally and materially, and he was jealous for her. He had known, better than either of his parents, the dangers to their comfort that would come from settling down in an environment so far removed from that to which they had been accustomed. He had pressed on them the alternative house, because it was not so surrounded by undiluted squiredom and Toryism, but he had not given that reason. Now he thought he saw his mother beginning to realize what it meant, and was

flustered by the discovery. With her straightforward character and solid achievements, she was a woman of mark, if she were placed where they could tell. They had been her passport into any society she might wish to enter. But they would not carry her far in the sort of society that Lady Ruth so well adorned, which she had never had the least desire to enter. Had it already begun to come home to her that she could not treat it with such entire absence of consideration as she had done before; that she must in some measure allow for its existence, since it would be all around her; and that it carried more weight than she had ever been disposed to admit? If so, it would be bound to set her at issue with herself, to find that her own outstanding qualities were unhonoured, when they had hitherto made her life so full, and that she had planted herself in a world where she would be affected by a kind of superiority she had never acknowledged.

She would feel it much more than his father. Dr. Merrow would dream his dreams and see his visions if he were to be placed for a time in the exclusive society of a set of smart racing men, and would find something essentially lovable in them. He would make no demands of community of pursuits or interests, wherever he might be placed. Common humanity would form his basis. Charles could allow his humour to play safely and affectionately round his father's capacity for making way with the most unlikely subjects. He had not infrequently seen preliminary disapprobation—at the very existence of such a person as a dissenting minister—melted to abashed concealment of such feeling, and sometimes to the warmest esteem for this particular representative of a despised order. During his undergraduate days he had made various experiments in introductions. A fellow-member of his college crew, somewhat notorious for loose living, in a society where loose

living is not the rule, in spite of loose talk, had told Charles, after spending an evening in Dr. Merrow's company, that he was damned lucky to have such a father, and he would be a brute if he ever gave him any trouble. It was only the men who were trying to fit themselves into a set of opinions, to which they imagined Dr. Merrow to be opposed, who seemed to hold out against him; and after one of these had tried to draw him into argument, Charles had come definitely to the conclusion, to which he had been for some time tending, that opinions on ecclesiastical matters were the devil, and he would have as little as possible to do with them on his own account.

"What about the Rector himself?" he now asked.

Again there was the slightest pause, but it was Dr. Merrow who answered. "He is a man who gives himself up whole-heartedly to the work he has in hand," he said, "a kindly, considerate man. I assure you we are very proud of him in Roding. We like his handsome aristocratic air. It does us good to see him walking about the streets, and he always has a nice word for gentle or simple. He fulfils the ideal of 'a gentleman in every parish,' and I think there is a good deal to be said for it, if they were all as charitable and painstaking as our Rector. We always talk about him as 'The Rector' here. He is the figure-head of Roding, and a very fine figure-head."

There was no spice of irony in all this, although Charles knew very well that the ideal of a gentleman in every parish was far from being his father's, if it was to stand for any part of the spirit he wished to see quickened into life.

"But, dear Charles," Dr. Merrow went on, "why do you ask us exclusively about our highly-placed neighbours? I begin to suspect you of Whiggery. If you must leave the paths in which I tried to bring you up, Charles, don't become a Whig, I beseech you; become a dear, stupid,

crusted Tory. They have great virtues; at their best they treat their poorer neighbours as human beings."

"They don't give them much of a chance in the mass."

"Ah, but you can't treat any body of people exclusively in the mass. It is the mistake a good many of *us* make. Who thinks of himself as one of a mass? I have never met any such person."

"My experience is that the treating of the poor with the sort of friendliness that's made so much of is a very poor substitute for freedom and independence. Cheap enough, too, when there's everything on the one side, and nothing on the other."

"Well, we're not talking about that for the moment, and I don't say it should be a substitute for anything. I only say that it's a good thing in itself. It is a very good thing not to count all your friends amongst those who wear black coats and live in comfortable houses. I am making many friends in Roding, Charles. They are the dearest people, always pleased to see me. They tell me all about themselves, and what they are doing, and what they are hoping for. You don't get to that sort of intimacy when you dine out in big houses. And their lives are of such variety. I am getting initiated into a whole new world, even in this small corner of it. One of my friends is a cabinet-maker, and he likes to talk to me while he works. Do you know how those patterns of different coloured woods are made, Charles? It is very interesting. I'll take you to see him some day. Another goes out and works in other people's houses by the day. She is a widow with two little children. Her life, which she takes as if it were the most natural in the world, makes me ashamed of my comforts and my idleness. She thanks me for coming to see her when she has a moment to spare—says it does her good to see me. The good, tender, courageous soul—she little knows

what good it does me to be taken into her friendship. Oh, dear Charles, I'm learning the truth of that saying, 'Blessed are the poor.' You can't learn that lesson in kings' houses. I am very happy living here."

After tea Dr. Merrow was left to finish letters for the post, and Charles and his mother went out to stroll up and down together by the river. A gate had been made in a corner of the garden, which led to the meadow and across it to the path which ran from Roding to Farncombe. It was hardly shorter than the road, and was little used except by those who wanted a pleasant saunter. The flowers and the grass were high on the river banks now, the water-weeds swayed in the shallows, swifts and swallows darted and swooped across the gently flowing stream.

"Your father has come to love the river," said Mrs. Merrow. "He walks up and down here very often. Oh, Charles, I am so glad we came here. It has turned out so well for him. You see the improvement, don't you? It is plain for anybody to see?"

She spoke anxiously. No one, not even her son, had been allowed to see the awful abyss of terror that had shuddered before her for months. But now that the strain was over and she was daring to breathe freely once more, she wanted support for her hopes.

Charles slipped his arm into hers. "He's a different man altogether," he said. "I have never seen him looking so well since I can remember."

"Ah, well," she said with a sigh of relief. "That makes up for everything."

"Dear old mother!" he said. "You haven't got quite used to it yet, have you?"

"Oh, what does that matter," she said, "if he's happy? And he is happy here; much more so than I should have

thought possible. He loves his little flock; you heard what he said about them. I never thought he would take to it all as he has; it is so different from what he has been accustomed to. At first I tried to keep him to himself, as I used to have to, if he was to get through what he had to do. But he is always so much wiser than I am. He said that he must at least see all of them once in their own homes, and, of course, he made himself loved wherever he went. I don't know whether these people are more warm-hearted than usual; I know so little about it all, though, of course, I've visited and visited, in London; but they gave him the kind of welcome that he liked, and now he spends a great deal of his time going in and out amongst them. He really looks upon them all as friends, even those that are better off than the rest, who are always more difficult than the poor."

"Do a lot of people come to hear him preach?"

"Not nearly so many as you would think. I was surprised at it, at first. But he does not seem to think of that, or want it very much. He preaches the simplest kind of sermons—more like talks, addressed to the people who belong to us, inspired by what he is learning day by day of their lives and their needs. It is very restful, and very beautiful too; and extraordinary, how completely he has adapted himself. But he always goes beyond what one could have imagined. There is nobody like him."

"Tell me about the Rector. Not exactly spiritually minded, I should imagine, though father made the best of him."

"He always makes the best of everybody. But you can translate what he said. It's all work, work, work, and self-satisfaction. I'm getting rather tired of all this talk of work, that the Church prides itself on so. It isn't work with your father; it's pure love."

"He shows himself friendly?"

"Mr. French? Oh, yes. Of course, through it all you can see that he is rather proud of himself for being friendly."

"Is he inclined to be jealous?"

"I don't think so. The Church is everything here, and father makes no sort of attempt to dispute the supremacy on which he prides himself."

"But father must have made some difference. Surely, more people go to the chapel than used to!"

"The congregations are always increasing. Quite a lot of people walk in from the villages round on Sunday evenings, and a good many Roding people come occasionally that used not to come. But I don't think the membership has increased at all—or only a very little. Of course, if father liked to make an effort! But he is content with his numbers. No doubt Mr. French thinks that it is all owing to his superiority that more people go to church than to chapel."

Charles laughed at her, and pressed her arm affectionately. "Well, whatever you may say about Lady Ruth," he said, "you don't like her husband, mother."

"No, I don't. It seems to me extraordinary that a man like that, with nothing to lift him out of the ruck, except his mere relationships, should think that he is on an equality with such a man as your father, let alone superior to him, as he does."

Charles felt a little sad. Even when allowances were made for his mother's loyal jealousy, it was plain that the Rector was not one of those who had succumbed to his father's rare personality, or perhaps was capable of recognizing it.

"What about other people?" he asked. "There's a curate, isn't there, who was also at Cambridge with me, though I don't remember him?"

"Mr. Barton. He came to see your father directly after we arrived, and before he was seeing anybody. He hasn't been near us since."

"Did father return his call?"

"Return his call? He just came to ask after him; the rectory people were away. I think Mr. French asked him to come. I don't much want to see him again. There was rather an unpleasant occurrence here, which I don't want to go into. But there was a son of Mr. Gosset's whom he got hold of, and persuaded to join the church. At least, Mr. French says he didn't persuade him. But at any rate, he prepared him for confirmation, as they call it. He's about five and twenty, and spends most of his time on horse-back. I don't want your father to be bothered with that sort of young man. He would probably try to get up an argument with him about the Athanasian Creed, or something of that sort."

"Are there any other people you have got to know?"

"There's the doctor and his wife. He smells of tobacco, and she is a harmless sort of scarecrow without an idea in her head. And the master of the grammar school and his wife—neither of them very interesting. Then there's Mr. Curtis, the vicar of Farncombe. Your father likes him, and his wife is a sensible sort of woman, who was a governess once, she told me. I can talk to her. One or two other people have called, and we've returned their calls. It's likely to end there, as far as I can see. They all live some way off, and there's none of them who is really worth knowing, though no doubt they think they are."

Charles felt disappointment. His mother had adapted herself even less than he had thought she would; and the review in which she had passed her neighbours was quite unlike her usual way of referring to people. She had always had such an abundance of congenial acquaintances that it

had not been worth while criticising the people she had not cared about.

"There, now, I've told you about everybody," she said in a different tone. "The fact is that I never expected to find people here who could make up for all the friends we have parted ourselves from. I thought we should be quite contented to live our own life and to have some of our own friends to stay with us occasionally, as we have had, and shall have. Your father is quite contented. He has made real friends amongst his own people, and doesn't miss anything. And if he is contented that is enough for me. Still, Charles, as you have surprised me into grumbling, I will confess that I do miss seeing people, and what makes me miss it is that one seems to be expected to take the uncongenial people one does have to see in place of the others. I never thought of that, and I really can't make up my mind to do it."

"I think you'll fall into it, mother," he said. "You don't expect to find everybody very interesting in the country; but there are always lots of nice people amongst them, nice in different ways. You don't want to make close friends with any of them, perhaps; but they make a background of acquaintances."

"Yes, I see that that is what all this coming and going amongst country neighbours means. It's a method of passing the time. Obviously, even a woman like Lady Ruth, who has no intellectual interests, can't find all the people she is continually going to see and take meals with and so on—she can't find them all equally congenial. Well, I don't care about wasting my time in that way. My life has always been a serious one, and what little time I have had for social pleasures I have expected to give me real pleasure, and added interests. I have enjoyed meeting new people, and there was always the chance of meeting somebody that

one was really glad to meet. What would be offered one here, if one cared to take it, would be a very poor substitute for all that. I don't think it is worth it, and as long as your father is happy I shall be quite content to let it all go by, and live in a very retired way."

CHAPTER XXI

THE YOUNG MAN

THE Rector was drinking a cup of tea alone in his study. Lady Ruth and Sylvia were out; Joyce and Eddie were playing in the garden.

A maid came in with a card. "Mr. Harry Evans." No address.

The Rector looked puzzled. "Who is he?" he asked.

"A young gentleman, sir. I think he has come by train. He has a little bag, and I thought he was the piano-tuner. But he said he wanted to see you, sir."

The Rector frowned, possibly at her volubility. She was new in service, had been a favourite of his as a child in the schools, and was doing temporary duty for the parlour-maid.

"Show him in here.

The frown did not leave his face when she went out. He rose and seated himself at his writing-table.

A young man came into the room, dressed in a suit of black. He seemed to be suffering from acute nervousness. He had very black hair, rather long, and very black eyes. The maid's guess at his calling showed some observation on her part. But he was not a piano-tuner.

The maid allowed time, before she shut the door, to hear the pleasant greeting which would put a stranger, whoever he was, at his ease. She admired her master, and liked to hear him speak to people.

But no such greeting came. The Rector motioned the young man to a seat. "You wanted to see me?" he said.

The young man cleared his throat nervously, and dropped his eyes. "I come from Llanruthin," he said.

The Rector rose and closed the glass doors leading into the garden, where the happy voices of his children were heard at their play. When he took his seat again, his face was white, but firmly set. He looked at the young man with searching eyes, and there was aversion in them. "Tell me straight out who you are, and what you want," he said.

The young man moistened his lips; his eyes were still downcast, and he played with his soft felt hat, round which there was a band of crape.

"My mother died a fortnight ago," he said. "Her name was Mary Evans. She had always told me my father was dead. But before she died she told me the truth."

"What did she tell you?"

"She told me that when she was a young girl living at Llanruthin, you came down there with a party of young gentlemen from Oxford, with a tutor, for the summer; and—that I was your son."

There was a long pause. The Rector sat with his eyes on the desk in front of him. The young man plucked up courage to raise his eyes to his face, but it told him nothing. "I can give you particulars, if you like," he said. "I've got letters with me, written by solicitors on behalf of Sir Horace French."

"What did those letters say? I suppose you have read them."

"Yes. My mother told me to. They were to pay her money."

"On what conditions?"

The answer came unwillingly. "On condition that she made no further claims."

"Was that all?"

"And that she was not to make known who the father of her child was."

"To anybody in particular?"

"Not to the child itself if it lived."

"Never."

"No, never."

"And she accepted the money on those terms. In fact, she swore to keep them. Is that so?"

"Yes, she did. But on her death-bed she was in great trouble——"

"Wait a minute. Were there any other stipulations?"

"She could live anywhere she liked except in Llanruthin."

"The money was paid to her regularly. It was enough for her to live on, and bring up her child."

"Yes, in a small way."

"In at least as good a way as she had lived in before, and her parents had lived."

"She never said it wasn't enough."

"You say you come from Llanruthin. Did she live there in spite of her undertaking?"

"She went back there when she thought she was dying. She died there."

"How did the money come to her?"

"She was only there for two months. It would have come to her at Swansea, where we had always lived."

Again there was a pause. Then the Rector asked: "Well, what have you come to me for?"

The young man moistened his lips again. He had seemed to pluck up courage during this cross-examination, but now his eyes fell again.

"I've never had a father," he said awkwardly. "I wanted to see you, and tell you about myself."

The Rector's expression changed. He looked out of the window and his face became sad.

"Well, tell me about yourself," he said, in a voice in which there was some kindness.

"My mother brought me up very respectably. She was a good mother to me, and it was a great blow to me to learn what she told me before she died."

"Tell me what she died of. I think it was very wrong of her to break her pledged word, when she could no longer suffer for it—very wrong towards me, and towards you. But you say she died only a fortnight ago, and was a good mother to you, for—how old are you?"

"Thirty, nearly thirty-one. She'd been ill a long time. It was cancer."

"Ah!" The trouble that was taking the place of surprise and hostility on the Rector's face deepened. "Did she have everything that she needed?" he asked.

"She had two operations in Swansea, and she had a nurse at the last."

"Could she afford to pay for all that?"

"The solicitors sent money for it. She was to have everything that was necessary."

The Rector looked at him in some surprise, but turned his head again, and made no comment on this statement.

"She thought you had told them to send it. That's why she told me at the last. She thought you were still thinking kindly of her, and would like to hear about her, and about me."

The Rector turned again and looked at him closely. His expression was now kind, almost tender, but deeply troubled. "You are a man," he said. "I can talk plainly to you. When I was very much younger than you—hardly more than a boy—idle and selfish and unthinking—I fell into temptation, you know how. Such wrongs as I committed can't be done away with, they can only be patched up. Everything was done, when the truth had to be known—

to my father—that could be done, to mend the wrong to your mother. She was satisfied, her parents were satisfied. It was so arranged that the child that was to be born—that you—should be brought up in such a way that the facts of your birth should not be known, and you should not suffer for them. You—and she—would be rather better circumstanced than if your mother had married in her own sphere, and had been left a widow. This was done partly out of justice to her, partly for my sake—so that a fault—a serious fault—of my early youth should not wreck the whole of my life. A bargain was made. It was kept on our side, it seems to have been more than kept. It rested on your mother's keeping her side whether I could carry out the plans already made for me, whether I could occupy the position I now occupy, whether I could marry, and my wife and children should not suffer from a fault of mine long since repented of. Can you see this? Can you see how little likely I should be to wish to have the past brought up—now after more than thirty years?"

The young man showed himself moved by his. He was of an emotional temperament, and his eyes grew moist. "I know it's a very dreadful thing all round," he said. "Sometimes I wish she hadn't told me anything."

The Rector's face changed again. "Why do you wish that, only sometimes?" he asked. "You say your mother brought you up well. You look, and talk, as if you had been better educated than—than she was. Surely, it would have been better for you to have remained in ignorance."

The young man made no direct reply to this. A hint of distrust showed itself in the Rector's face as he looked closely at him.

"Mother wanted to bring me up for the ministry," he said. "She determined on that after she got converted herself. She did all she could for me. I did well at school,

and went to college, and I did well there, but—well, it wasn't anything bad—I got into mischief—and at the end of it they put it off.”

“Put what off? And what sort of mischief did you get into? Speak plainly.” His tone had reverted to that of his earlier questions.

“I stayed out at night—only one night. There were two or three of us in it. It was just before we should have been taken into the ministry, and they said we must wait for a year, and then come up again.”

The aversion showed itself again now in the Rector's eyes. “You must speak more plainly still,” he said. “You mean that two or three of you, who were just about to be ordained, got out of your college at night—or stayed out—which? And what for?”

“We stayed out. We had been for a church excursion in the country.”

“Were you alone?”

“There were young ladies with us. It was in the summer. We stayed out of doors all night. We'd missed the brakes—going back with the rest. We couldn't get back. There was nothing more than that.”

“Is that the truth? Are you telling me the whole truth?”

“Well, one of the students did go wrong. They dismissed him altogether when it was known. The rest of us they knew all about, and they sent us away for a year; but if we had done nothing wrong in the meantime we could come up for acceptance again.”

“When it was known! You mean that this one man became the father of a child.”

“Yes.”

“And it was after that was known that they dismissed him altogether. Before that they had only put him off for a year.”

"Yes, it was like that."

"Had you all declared that there had been nothing wrong between you and these girls."

"Yes."

"He, with the rest, of course?"

"Yes." All his answers came unwillingly, but as if he had no power to hold back anything, in face of the sharp peremptory questions.

"You said at first that you had stayed out all night, but there was nothing more than that. Then that was a lie."

"I'm very sorry I said that. I never thought you would ask me about it, and it was all over years ago, and everything was confessed and forgiven. I didn't want to have to go all over it again."

"Do you say now that there was nothing wrong, except with this one man, whose lie couldn't be hid? Nothing in your case, I mean; you can't speak for the others."

"Oh, I won't keep anything back. They brought us all up again, and we confessed. We were all repentant. There was a minister who spoke very kindly to us. We were really repentant; two of the men have been called to the ministry since, and they are already doing a great work. Their names are well known; it has never been brought up against them again."

"Well," said the Rector sadly, "it's not for me to throw stones. But I think this confession of yours ought to remove from your mind anything like reproach that you may have felt against me. As far as I understand you, this happened when you were on the very eve of joining your ministry. I'm very far from wanting to boast about myself in those days, but I don't think I could have fallen in that way at such a time as that. My fall had happened two or three years before, when I had hardly begun to think of what lay before me. And I very much wish you hadn't told

me lies about it. You told more than one. You said at first that you got into mischief—there was nothing bad.”

There was no answer to this.

“Well, go on,” said the Rector, with a sigh. “Why didn’t you go back with the rest? Or perhaps you did. Are you a minister?”

He looked with distaste at the black clothes, which, except for the soft felt hat, had nothing clerical in them.

“No; I became a schoolmaster. I got on well, and when the time came when I could have gone back, I put it off. Then after that my religious views began to change, and I didn’t want to go on in the denomination I was brought up in.”

“What was that?”

“Congregationalist.”

“Did you join another body?”

“I haven’t yet. I’ve been thinking it all over carefully; but I’ve made up my mind now. I’m going to join the Established Church.”

“Oh!” The news apparently brought none of the gratification which the young man seemed to have expected; for he had spoken for the first time with his eyes fixed upon the Rector’s face.

“Why?” The question came sharply, and the eyes dropped again.

“Because I believe in their tenets. I’ve studied them. And because I believe there’s a great work to be done in the Church in Wales. It’s increasing slowly, in spite of all the talk against it, and there’s a great chance in it for preachers.”

The look showed more aversion than ever. “Do you mean to say that you want to take Orders in the Church?”

“Yes. That’s what I do want. It’s what I’ve come to talk to you about.”

The Rector leant back in his chair. His face showed angry annoyance. "I can't see that you're fitted for it in any possible way," he said. "And why should you have come to me?"

The young man seemed to take hold of himself, to plead a cause more efficaciously. He had shown himself hitherto submissive, and somewhat shamefaced, as if he felt himself at a strong disadvantage. Now he sat upright, and spoke with more freedom than he had yet done.

"I've told you the worst about myself," he said. "It was just one mistake, and it has never been repeated. Except for that, I've kept straight all my life, and considering what I sprang from I've raised myself a good deal."

"You needn't talk about what you sprang from. By your own admission you knew nothing of it till a fortnight ago, and it could not have affected you in any way."

"I didn't mean that. I was talking of what I thought I'd sprung from. My mother was a poor woman, and she always told me that if I wanted to get on I should have to depend on my own exertions. I did all I could have done at school, and I passed second out of all into college. If I hadn't done that one wrong thing I should have passed out high—perhaps first. I was already known in the denomination, for my preaching, as a student. I should have got a good charge. I'd done all that; I'd raised myself, and mother was very proud of what I had done. And I've got on well with teaching too. If it was only to get on in the world I wanted, I should have nothing to complain of. But I feel called upon to preach the Word. I have great gifts for it; I'm not going only by what I feel myself; it's what others say of me. The professors at the college said it; they have asked me to go back. That mistake I made is quite forgotten; they know I've repented of it; and I've shown ever since that I'm earnest in whatever I do."

"Have you told them that you have made up your mind to leave them? Do you go to church—or to chapel?"

"I haven't told any one yet. I go to church sometimes; not very often. It's a serious thing in Wales to make any change of that sort until you can see your way clearly ahead."

"How long is it since you began to think of making any change?"

"About a year. I've been reading and thinking about it."

"Tell me one point—just one single point that seems to you important—where you think the Church is right and those amongst whom you were brought up are wrong. Something that decided you."

He thought for a moment. "I think that a national recognition of religion is an important thing," he said. "I think it is right to have a State Church."

"But you know perfectly well that the Church in Wales is likely to be disestablished very soon if the bulk of your countrymen have their own way."

"You asked me for something that had decided me. I have thought what I said for a long time."

"Have you said so to others? It has been the chief movement amongst those with whom you have lived for years."

"Yes, I have said so, in conversation."

"Never publicly, I suppose."

"No, I couldn't have done that in my position."

"I don't see why you couldn't have done it, if you were so convinced of its truth that it was the chief deciding point with you. Have you ever appeared at a meeting in support of Disestablishment?"

"I've never spoken at one."

"But you have attended meetings. Have you voted? Have you done it within the last year?"

"I don't think you can understand how strong the feeling is amongst——"

"Oh, you needn't make excuses. It seems to have been all time-serving. I don't want to hear any more about it. It's no reason at all. And I didn't ask you for that sort of point either. I mean some point of doctrine. You say you have been studying the question for a year."

"There isn't so much difference in doctrine between us, in Wales, except with the ritualists. I'm not a ritualist. I'm an Evangelical still, and should preach the pure Gospel, wherever I went."

"Do you believe in the Apostolic Succession?"

"Not as a doctrine, I don't. I think very likely it's a fact."

"Or Baptismal Regeneration?"

"That isn't a doctrine held by Evangelicals in the Church, is it?"

"It's a doctrine that you will find very plainly stated in the Prayer Book. Do you believe that grace comes through the Sacraments at all?"

"Yes, I do, if the recipient comes in faith."

"You believed that before, didn't you? Do you still take the Sacrament of Communion in the chapel to which you go?"

"Yes; I have not resigned my membership yet."

"And you acknowledge no difference between that and a celebration of Holy Communion by a priest of the Church. I see you don't. You see no difference at all, except apparently, that the Church is established—at present—and the sects are not. There's no need to labour the point. What is your reason for wanting to make the change? Is it because you want to get on, as you say? Because the Church in Wales is still more important—socially, or what not—than the other bodies? Isn't that your reason, and your only reason? You have given me no other, except one that contradicts itself."

He spoke with strong irritation, and some contempt. The young man gathered himself together again.

"I'm afraid you are inclined to think very badly of me," he said. "I said the Church in Wales, because it is the only one I know anything of, and it is plain to any one that if it had been able to draw the good preachers, to the extent that the Free Churches have, it would have been in a much stronger position. There is a very great chance in it for a preacher. I can only say that I have felt myself drawn to it, and conscientiously believe that the way is pointed out to me. I hoped you would be pleased to hear that I had been thinking of it, long before I knew—who you were. It's your own Church, for one thing. I thought you would be pleased, if you took any interest in me at all, to find that I have been wanting to do the same thing that you are doing. I thought you might perhaps help me to do it in a more regular way."

"What do you mean by that? I don't understand you."

The eyes dropped again. "It isn't so easy to ask what I thought I would ask when I came here. You seem so suspicious of all my motives."

"You give me no reason not to be. What did you come here to ask?"

"I thought you might be willing to help me to go to Oxford, and prepare for the ministry of the Church in the regular way."

"Why should you want to go to Oxford, at your age? It would take you two or three years to get a degree, which wouldn't even be necessary. It *wouldn't* be the regular way for a man of your age to prepare for Orders, if he were really in earnest. It would be sheer waste of time."

"I thought it was the best way; especially as it was the way you took."

"I wasn't at Oxford; but never mind that. It's per-

fectly plain to me what is in your mind. You make it so plain, that I can only suppose—and hope—that you don't see it yourself; though the veriest child could see it. You want to raise yourself, as you say you have always wanted. It's your only reason for wishing to leave the sect in which you were brought up. If you really had the strong desire you say you have to preach, you wouldn't have put off preaching for years after you might have done it. If you really thought you were called on to preach—which is all you seem to think of—in the Church, you would never think of putting it off for another three years to go to Oxford. Young men preparing for Orders go to the Universities to finish their regular education. You have gone through all that already, I suppose. Any further training you would need would be to fit you directly for your work. A University degree would necessitate your putting that entirely aside for a time. What you do want is to hang a hood on your back and call yourself an Oxford man; and you are prepared to waste three years of your time for it."

The young man was obviously cast down by this address. There was something simple about him, in spite of his vanity and self-conceit, which showed itself in his making those qualities so apparent, as well as in his unconsciousness of them himself. Probably it only arose from ignorance of the ways of the world outside the narrow circle in which he had moved all his life, for it did not look like the sort of native simplicity of mind that commands respect.

"You made up your mind to come and ask me for money to enable you to go to Oxford," the Rector went on. "What should you have done if you had not— What should you have done up to a fortnight ago, before there was any one you thought you could have asked for that?"

He lifted his head, and spoke with some eagerness. "I hadn't wanted to settle anything before mother died," he

said. "I knew it couldn't be long. But they are ready to take me into the Church. At least I talked in confidence to a clergyman, and he was glad I was thinking about it. He said they wanted men like me. I gave him some of my sermons to read that I'd preached when I was a student; and he knew what they had thought of me in the college. He said he thought it could be arranged for me to go for a year to a Church Theological College, and he would do all he could to help me to get there, when I had made up my mind."

"Well, of course, that would be the proper way. Would there be money to pay for you there?"

"Most of the students would pay for themselves. But there are grants besides. I've saved up a little money towards it, and mother left me a few pounds and some furniture."

The Rector sat for a long time in thought. His face had become softer again, and deeply troubled. No one, if they had seen it during the foregoing conversation, would have guessed what a weight he had at his heart. It was getting heavier and heavier now every moment.

He roused himself. "I don't know what to say," he said. "I feel inclined to leave it to the man you say you have already consulted with. I can't see that your motives are sincere, and I shouldn't do anything towards helping you to raise yourself socially by means of the Church—certainly nothing like sending you to Oxford. But I might, perhaps, pay for you for a year at a Theological College, if they are willing to take you—not, of course, on my recommendation; I wouldn't give that in any case."

"Oh, if you would do that! I see what you say about Oxford. And I don't want to waste time. I want to begin."

Apparently Oxford had only been a forlorn hope. He showed great eagerness now for the other plan.

"I don't say I will do it. I must think matters over very carefully. I am not at all sure that I ought to do it, after everything you have told me. And, besides that, there are very serious considerations to take into account. I am not going to do anything that can be made to bear the interpretation of hushing things up."

Was there a shade of anxiety in the look with which these words were accompanied, as if he were inviting something which he was yet ashamed to ask? He was nerving himself to the strictest rectitude; but he was only human, and a dreadful pit of shame, for himself and others, yawned before him.

"I wish you hadn't said that," said the young man, not without dignity. "I was thinking all the time I travelled up that if I wasn't careful it would look as if I wanted to hold threats over you, because of what I'd learnt. I hoped you wouldn't think so badly of me as that. I hoped I should be able to make it plain that I wanted to see you just once, because of what my mother had said about you. She said you were different from all the others—I mean the gentlemen who came with you to Llanruthin—and she had never wanted to get married, as she might have done afterwards; and she had many a time wanted to tell me what my father was like, and hoped I would grow up like him. That was why she told me at the last, and she said you were so kind that she knew you would forgive her for breaking her word when you heard she was dead. And I thought, too, that you'd be glad to know I hadn't disgraced you—except that once, which I thought you wouldn't know about—and perhaps be glad to hear of what I had done, and what I wanted to do. I'm sorry you don't think better of me. You've got different ways of looking at things than I have. After all, you're a gentleman born, and I'm only trying to make myself one. I don't know all their ways yet;

but there's one thing I wouldn't do, whatever you thought of me, and that's to bring disgrace on you. Even if I didn't want to act right, I shouldn't be likely for my own sake to let the facts of my birth become known. It couldn't do me any good."

The Rector breathed deeply. His relief was mixed with some shame and some compunction. This was his son who sat before him, not intentionally as an avenging spirit of the past, but seeking for some consolatory sign of fatherhood. And he had given him none.

He felt no emotion of fatherliness towards him even now. He was so unlike—in spirit, in training, manner, appearance—everything—what a son of his should be. He seemed to come between him and the children upon whom his proud fatherhood was so amply and righteously expended. It was a pang to hear him utter the word father.

But he felt sorrow on his behalf. His lapses from any ordinary standard of good breeding would not have made those ugly marks on his character, would not have existed at all, if he had not been denied his birthright. Even the graver faults might have been corrected; he seemed amenable enough, in spite of his self-conceit. He had been left to make what he could of himself. His only help had come from the woman who had been got rid of, paid off, left to bear the burden of a common sin as best she might, to sin again, for all that the man who had first sinned with her cared, so long as she undertook not to cross his path again. That she had not sinned again, but had set herself to help the child of her shame to rise above his surroundings, even if it only meant a poor step or two in gentility, was a positive virtue in her, under all the circumstances. The same desires in her son were not altogether deserving of contempt, considering from what he had sprung. How was he to know how the naïve exhibition of them would strike

a man standing upon a plane on which such struggles appeared mean and absurd, because he had never had to struggle for such things himself, but had always enjoyed them of right?

He spoke to him more gently. "A great deal of what you have told me about your mother and yourself I am very glad to hear," he said. "I do forgive her for having told you the truth. I think it would have been better for you if you had not known it; but as you do know it, and have come to me, I can't fall back upon the bargain as it was originally made. That was to end with your mother's death, but now it can't end so. But I can't treat you as a father should treat his son. That is out of my power now. I should have no right to do it, remembering what I owe to others. But I will help you as far as I can—as far as I can satisfy myself that I ought to. I will not lose sight of you."

Before the young man could reply a chiming clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour. The Rector looked back at it, and rose hurriedly to ring the bell. The interview had already lasted a long time.

He did not speak again until the maid came into the room, but stood with his back to the room looking into the empty grate.

"When her ladyship comes in, tell her I am engaged."

He took his seat again. "Are you going back to Wales?" he asked. "Where are you living now?"

"In Swansea. I went back there after mother died. I am still teaching there, at any rate till the end of the month. I got leave to come away for two nights. I have to leave London to-morrow. I can get a night train."

Had he expected, in his ignorance, that he would be asked to stay at Roding that night? He had brought his "little bag."

"You had better go back to London to-night. There is a train at seven. Have you got money?"

He flushed. "I don't want money," he said. "I didn't come for that."

"No, I know you didn't. In many ways you have behaved very well. I will write to you. Your address isn't on your card. Write it down."

The Rector had spoken hurriedly and anxiously ever since the clock had struck. He looked at it again now as the young man leant over the writing-table.

"I will take you out this way," he said, opening the window into the garden.

They went along the terrace that ran behind the house to the door in the wall of the churchyard. The young man cast surreptitious glances at the spreading lawns of the garden, the well-filled flower-beds, the great pots and vases of flowers on the terrace itself, and the encampment of chairs and tables under an awning outside the drawing-room window. Nobody was about. Joyce and Eddie had gone in to their nursery upstairs.

A paved path led through the churchyard diagonally to the lych-gate. Lady Ruth's carriage passed as the Rector opened the door in the wall. Neither she nor Sylvia was looking that way.

But Miss Budd was; although the Rector did not see her. She was coming through the churchyard by another path on the other side of the church. She saw the Rector put his hand on the shoulder of a common-looking young man and say something to him earnestly. Then he turned round sharply, and the garden door shut behind him.

The young man came down the path, and took out his handkerchief to rub his eyes. He cast a glance at Miss Budd, and put his handkerchief in his pocket again. She followed him out through the lych-gate.

CHAPTER XXII

STEPS UP

THE Rector did not go back to the house. He wanted to think undisturbed, and he felt that if he were to see his wife or any of his children now, he must show signs of what had befallen him. He felt smirched, unworthy to be in their presence.

He was going over to dine with his brother, who had returned to Roding Court a few days before. He was going alone, which was fortunate, for it was imperative that he should talk to his brother. Lady Ruth and Sylvia were also dining out, at a house some distance off. They would not have more than time to dress before they started, which was also fortunate. He need not go in until they had left the house.

He went down through the garden to where a broad path ran along by the river, masked by trees from the house. Joyce and Eddie were not allowed to come here, and the gardeners seldom had occasion to do so. He would be quite alone.

He walked up and down with his hands behind his back, his eyes fixed on the ground. Sometimes he sat for a minute or two in the garden house at the end of the path under the high boundary wall, but never for long. His troubled thoughts drove him to motion; they threatened to overwhelm him when he sat still.

The river ran here in two channels, divided by a long narrow island, on which were trees and a thick shrubbery. It was part of the rectory garden, and an ornamental bridge

ran across to it at the end of the walk. There was a low boom at each end of the island to keep this part of the stream private.

This walk under the trees was as secluded as possible, but on the other side of the island boats were continually passing to and fro, and voices from them were continually heard. The townspeople were much on the river on summer evenings. There was a landing stage, with boats for hire, just above the rectory garden. The continuation of the treed path ran beneath an open stretch of sloping lawn in full sight of the main stream for some distance; the rectory garden—which ran below the churchyard as well as alongside of it—was the first ground that the boats would pass dropping down the river from the town. It was always much admired—in spring when the slopes were thick with daffodils and narcissus showing through the grass—in summer when the gay flower-beds and a glimpse of the large picturesque house could be seen, between the trees on the higher ground.

"Wouldn't mind changing places with the Rector," was a common form of comment on all this spacious well-endowed prospect. And sometimes something was added to the effect that he'd no cause to worry himself over anything. He was one of the lucky ones.

If his parishioners could have seen him now, walking up and down in a hidden part of his fine garden, within hearing of their voices, and could have seen the look on his face, they might have paused before wishing themselves in his place.

He put off going into the house until the last minute. From his dressing-room window he saw the dog-cart, which he had intended to drive himself, already standing in front of the door. He sent down to order the brougham in its place, and when he got into it, he drew up both the windows,

until he had passed beyond the town and George Barton's house.

It was after eight when he reached Roding Court, and his brother took him straight into the dining-room, with a good-humoured expostulation over his unpunctuality.

He could say nothing to him of what filled his mind until they were alone together, and nerved himself to talk of other matters in a natural way, so long as the servants were in the room.

There was one other matter of considerable importance to be mentioned. It was what he had wanted to talk to his brother about when he had written a note inviting himself to dine; but he would much rather not have talked about it now before the servants.

However, Sir Richard could not know that. There was no reason why the servants should not hear that the Rector had been offered the Archdeaconry of Medchester, since it had always been taken for granted that it would be offered to him whenever it should fall vacant, and there could be no question of his refusing it.

"Well, my dear Henry, I congratulate you on your news," was the first thing that Sir Richard said when they sat down at the table. "The Bishop has taken his time about it. But there was never much doubt about which way it would come. I suppose he didn't move sooner out of respect to the memory of old Bodington. He had a long innings, that old fellow. I remember his being appointed, when old Uncle John was still at Roding. He thought he ought to have had it, and was rather annoyed about it."

"How is Uncle John?" asked the Rector. "Have you seen him lately?"

"Saw him this morning. I went down to tell him the news. He's a little disappointed that it hasn't been offered

to him, even now. He says he couldn't have taken it—at eighty-nine—but he doesn't like to feel he's laid on the shelf. What will it mean for you, Henry? You'll have to go about the diocese a good deal more, I suppose."

"I haven't decided to take it yet," said the Rector. "It would give me a great deal of extra work, and I've got pretty well as much as I can do already."

"My dear fellow!" Sir Richard exclaimed; and then with a glance at his brother's face said: "Well, of course it wants thinking over. One doesn't jump at that sort of thing the moment it's offered one."

They went into the library to drink their wine. Everything was as when we last saw them there, except that the window open to the summer night was the place of their symposium, instead of the warm hearth. The light had not quite left the sky; the yews and cypresses of the formal garden stood up black against it, and the thick masses of flowers and foliage in the ordered rectangles still showed faint gradations of colour. Fountain-jets here and there cut the darkness of the yews with spears of white, and their falling made a pleasant sound. The wide enclosed garden was so private and so expensively trimmed to domesticity that it was hardly more than an extension of the richly furnished room. Here were the two men again ensconced in the fortress of their visible well-being. But for one of them it was no longer impregnable. A breach had been made in the walls, through which that might enter which would make havoc of all the comfort and security within.

"Richard, did you know of money being paid to that woman, Mary Evans, in her last illness?"

So that was it! It had been plain, since the statement of doubt about the Archdeaconry, that something had happened.

"She's dead, is she? They haven't told me that yet.

Yes, Henry. I told them to do whatever they could for her, and not worry you about it."

"It was very good of you, Richard. I had heard nothing of her, since it was all settled at our father's death."

"No reason why you should have heard anything, old fellow. It was all settled, and she kept her part of the bargain, and never gave us any trouble. Well, it's all over now. I suppose it has upset you, hearing about her death. But you can put it out of your mind for good and all now."

"I wish I could, Dick. Her son came to me this morning."

"Whew!" Sir Richard looked grave, and a little frightened. "She'd told him, then?"

"Yes, quite at the last. Poor thing; she seems to have thought that money for her illness came from me, and that I was thinking kindly of her. God knows, I'd no reason to think harshly of her; she has borne it all. But the fact is I had felt so secure that I hadn't thought of her at all, except sometimes a few months ago, when that business of young Gosset's brought it before me. I'd thought then how tongues would wag if it had been known that I, who was sitting in judgment, had done just what he had, and with less excuse."

"Oh, my dear fellow, don't let yourself think of it like that. There were a great many excuses. She was older than you; she made a set at you. I defy any young fellow, unless he's one in a thousand, at the age you were then, to stand out against that sort of thing. It's always the man who is blamed when anything happens, as if he must have laid himself out from the first to ruin the girl. Very often it's quite the other way about; it was so in your case. She knew very well what she was about, and under the circumstances you were likely to have to pay more heavily than she was if it became known. She was very well treated.

But it's bad that it should have come out now. I'm distressed to hear that. We'd better consult Brailles at once. He's always had it in hand, and he ought to be able to tackle the son. I suppose he has found out that the annuity ends with her life. It needn't, you know. He would have got something if she had died before he was of an age to earn his living."

"He didn't come to me for money. At least he wanted me to do something, which I'm not going to do. I may do something else for him. I wanted to consult you about it."

"Yes, tell me all about it, old fellow. Two heads are better than one. And whatever we do we'd better do through Brailles. It simply can't be allowed to come out now."

The Rector told him of what had passed during the afternoon.

"Well, it's rather an extraordinary story," he said. "She seems to have done well by him. Perhaps it would have been better if she had brought him up to some trade. Still, I suppose these Welshmen have got to hold forth, if they've got the slightest gift for it. I should almost feel inclined to send him to Oxford, if it will keep his mouth shut. Did he say he'd hold his tongue, if you did?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask him that."

"No, I suppose you couldn't. But Brailles could—and see that he did it too. It's what we've got to think about, anyhow."

"I don't think he will say anything. He behaved decently, according to his lights. Poor fellow, he knew that he would bring disgrace upon me if his parentage became known. On himself too, in the line he wants to follow."

"Yes, there is that. It's a safeguard. But I doubt whether it's enough."

"Dick, I can't look at it altogether in the light of my own safety. It seems to me that I should be acting meanly if I did. After all, he's my son. He said things that touched me. He's never had a father. He came to me—after what his mother had told him—thinking that I should be pleased to see him, hoping that I should be proud of the way he's raised himself, as he calls it, expecting that I would do something to help him raise himself still further. His ideas of raising himself are paltry enough, no doubt, and I showed him that they struck me so. But whose fault is it that he has those ideas? What have I ever done to help him towards higher ones? I tell you it struck me to the heart when he gave in about it, as he did. I was a gentleman, he said; he hadn't known how gentlemen looked at such things; he was sorry that he hadn't understood how I should feel about it. And yet he's of our blood—yours and mine. Our great-grandfather married a wench out of a tavern. She was no better than this poor woman; but her son succeeded, and we're descended from him. This poor fellow comes to me with all his glaring imperfections, and half of them rise from the sort of society in which he's been brought up—which *we* thrust him into; the other half, very likely—I don't know—from the very blood of ours that he has in his veins. We've been 'gentlemen' for two or three hundred years; it's quite possible that his being willing to use any lever to get near the place we've denied him comes from that, in some twisted sort of way—like water trying to find its own level. Oh, I do feel that we were wrong—years ago—in hiding it up. I'm beginning to feel that there was a double sin, and the greater of the two was the denial of fathership. What right had I—what right has any man to bring children into the world and forsake them?"

Sir Richard leant forward to fill his glass. His face was very serious. "My dear Harry," he said, in a low but firm

voice, "if you will take the word of a man who is not inclined to take a light or cynical view of such questions as these, you have no right to let your mind run on them now. We needn't go back to the time when they might have been discussed and acted upon. They *were* discussed, and they *were* acted upon. Such as that action was, you've got to stand by it; you know as well as I do *why*. The first thing we have to consider is how to keep this story as dark as it has always been kept. Everything else gives way to that. It's your first duty. When we have taken all possible precautions, you can think of other things; but not before."

The Rector's tone dropped. "Yes, I suppose you're right," he said. "You must be right. If he had shown any wish to make use of his discovery for getting out of me what he wanted—I mean in the way of making a bargain for his silence—I suppose I should not have thought of anything but closing his mouth. But I assure you that he *has* no intention of making the fact known."

"That makes it easier to deal with him. I think I had better do it myself. If Brailles were to do it——"

"I shouldn't like Brailles to do it. He was hurt—it was the best thing he showed me—at the very idea of his being willing to do me an injury. Brailles could only put it into his head that we thought it a natural thing to buy his silence—we, the 'gentlemen,' when he, poor fellow, was ready to keep it without any price. It can only depend upon his word. It only depended upon his mother's word. After all we did, we didn't buy her silence."

"Yes, I feel all that. It isn't a matter for bargaining. Henry, what's to prevent me from taking some of your responsibilities on my own shoulders? It's out of your power to play the part of a father to this son of yours. You've got other sons you would injure by doing it. It isn't out of my power. Let me see him; and leave it to me. I'll

make something of him; I'll give him his chance. If he thinks he can make a gentleman of himself by going to Oxford, I'll send him to Oxford. Why not? It isn't much to do for a man who has got himself ready for it, under all the difficulties he must have had. If we had known before that he had the brains to lift himself out of the ruck, we should certainly have been willing to help him—do more than we have done. It isn't too late, and if he is going to behave decently, I think that anything of that sort we can do for him is only his due."

"You're very good, Dick; very good indeed. I think it will be a good thing if you will see him. About Oxford—I don't know. I refused very definitely: I only looked at it from one point of view. He doesn't want to go there to get learning; he wants to go so that he shall cut a better figure in the Church; and he wants to take Orders in the Church because he'll cut a better figure than in the dissenting ministry."

"Oh, well—what if he does! We all like to cut a figure, I suppose. I know I for one should be infernally annoyed if anything could happen to deprive me of the position I hold; although when one has any sort of a position, by accident, a bit above the rest, one doesn't think much about it. If you're disposed to care for that sort of thing overmuch, you generally wish you'd got the position of the fellow next above you."

"Yes; and no doubt that will happen in this case. He goes to Oxford with those ideas, and soon discovers that it isn't much of a step up. What will he want then?"

"Nothing more for over three years, at any rate. Besides, it will be a good step up for *him*; and it will lead to something that he wants. Anything that he does afterwards will have to be done off his own bat. There may be ways in which we can help him. We needn't bother about them yet."

"I don't like his wanting to use the Church to lift himself socially."

"My dear fellow, it's done every day, by people who are—what shall I say?—not quite up to the mark. What we were talking about just now comes in. When they get there, they find they're not on such a lofty pinnacle after all, and they settle down to do their job with the rest. Men with those ideas aren't thinking of them all the time; they have other motives; and if they have anything in them, the other motives come to count for much more."

"No doubt, that's true. But the bad motive is very much in the ascendant in this case. I can't find the slightest reason for his wanting to change over, except that. He has all the ideas, and ways of expression—appearance—everything—of a dissenting preacher; he seems to have no idea that anything else is wanted. If I had had nothing to do with him—if he had come to me, say as Bishop's Examining Chaplain, I think I should have refused him. He knows nothing; though he says he has been 'studying.'"

"You wouldn't have refused him. You would have sent him away to learn more about it. And that's what we'll do. When he gets to Oxford, he may want to do something else altogether. Let him have his run, poor chap. Good heavens! Fancy wanting to go to Oxford at—thirty, is it? Shows what a thin time he must have had, poor fellow! You leave it to me, Henry. I'll do the right thing, whatever it is. And I think I *will* send him to Oxford. It rather strikes me,—his wanting to go there. And there's another thing about it, too. If you were to let him go to a Theological College, as you thought of, you *would* be pushing him into the Church. This would postpone that. If Oxford is worth anything, it ought to give him some ideas of values."

"Well, I'll leave it to you, Dick. I needn't say what a

weight you have taken off my mind. No, I can't do what I ought to; as you say, I have put it out of my power. Oh, it would be a terrible thing for Ruth and the children, if this were to come out now. As far as I am concerned, I should have to take my punishment; it would destroy all the value of my work; and if it happened, I suppose I should have to believe that the work hadn't any value—hadn't been accepted. It's hard to believe that when one has been doing one's best for so many years, and has got keener on it than one ever thought one would be. And yet, if the work was right,—if it is to go on,—something has to be concealed. It depends upon that. I have been asking myself, Dick, whether it is possible for such work to rest on concealment."

This was beyond Sir Richard's practical unexploratory mind. "I know we've got to conceal it," he said, "or trouble will come to those whom we think more of than we do of ourselves. That's quite enough for me to work on. It will be more difficult for you, Henry, because you can do nothing for yourself; you can only go on as usual. You said something about refusing the Archdeaconry. You can't do that. Everybody has known that it was coming to you, and that you were prepared to accept it."

"I don't know that everybody knows that. I have never talked about it outside; it would not have been becoming to do so. I feel very much averse to putting myself in a situation where I shall be more exposed to attack than I am now. Supposing it should come out after all! Besides, this affair hasn't exactly heightened my opinion of myself, Dick. Who am I that I should take upon myself a position of authority in the Church? It seems to me that that, at any rate, would be wrong, until I feel some assurance that the work I am doing now is not to be spoilt. No; I think I have made up my mind to refuse it. I have no inclination for it at all. I shrink from it."

Sir Richard considered this. "Perhaps it would be better to wait till I have seen the young man," he said. "I don't think anything will come out; but if it did, you are right in saying that you would be a bigger mark. But don't do anything yet, Henry. You can ask for time to consider, and prepare some sort of excuse, in case you should refuse. I don't know I'm sure, what it can be. You're in the prime of life, and full of energy. It is bound to make talk, if you refuse. However, you can think over that."

The Rector smiled ruefully. "The punishment is already beginning," he said, "whatever happens. I must find excuses; tell lies would be a truer way of putting it. I don't know how far I can bring myself to go on that road, Dick,—whether I should be right in taking it at all. But I will tell the Bishop I can't decide at once, if you like. I don't think I shall accept it, though. I don't think I can."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE TRAIN

"ARE you Mr. Evans?"

Sir Richard, standing in the booking office of the London terminus, had already asked that question three times, and once it had been answered in the affirmative, but not, as it turned out, by the right person.

But this was the right one. He breathed a sigh of relief. The Rector had not known where his son would stay in London; only that he was travelling down by the night train.

"That's right then. Come along with me. I've got your ticket."

The young man puzzled, but constitutionally amenable to authority, followed him across the platform, to a first-class carriage.

"Get in here," he said, "we shall have it to ourselves. I want to have a talk with you. I'm your father's elder brother. Have you had your dinner—supper, whatever it is?"

The young man stammered something about not wanting anything.

"I've ordered a couple of baskets. No harm in having something ready if we want it. You get in and make yourself comfortable; I'm going to get some papers. Glad I caught you. I was going down to see you, in any case; but I thought we might as well talk in the train as anywhere. When we've finished we can go to sleep."

"Well now!" The train had started; Sir Richard had

lit a cigar, and had been looking through a paper, which he now laid down. "First of all, let's have the position quite clear. Your father was a good deal startled at your turning up yesterday. I think you can see under the circumstances, that that was only natural."

The young man found his voice. He had hardly said anything hitherto, though Sir Richard had talked incessantly, in a genial matter-of-fact way designed to put him as much as possible at his ease.

"I suppose I ought not to have gone to see him," he said. "It was bound to give him a wrong idea of me. He thinks I want to get something out of him. But I don't want anything at all. I can't be anything to him now, and I have come to see that. He won't be troubled with me any more."

"When you say that you can't be anything to him now, that's only half true. If you mean that he doesn't care what becomes of you, it isn't true at all, and I'm here to tell you that. He does care—more than he gave you reason to believe yesterday."

The young man's eyes dropped, but he said nothing.

"What you must think of is this—I can say it to you plainly though he couldn't: He did a wrong to your mother many years ago, and a wrong to you through her, though you weren't born then, and if she had kept the silence that she promised to keep, you wouldn't have felt the wrong at all."

"I don't want to listen to blame of my mother, sir. She was mistaken in what she did, but she did it for the best, and if anybody has got to suffer for it, it's me."

"I don't want to blame her. What's done is done, and I hope you *won't* suffer for it. What I want to make clear is that the amends that were made for the wrong done to her were accepted by her as payment—payment in full—

and he acted, and had a right to act, as perhaps he couldn't have done if she hadn't accepted those amends."

"Yes, I know; he told me all that, and I see it. It's for me to keep the bargain now, as far as I can. If I didn't do that, then I should be bringing blame on mother for telling me, and of course, in other ways too, which would be a cruel thing to do—so good as she was."

Sir Richard felt a sensation of relief. There was delicacy of feeling in that speech—more than he had expected from what his brother had told him. And silence was more likely to be assured if it rested on filial affection as well as on self-interest.

"I'm very glad to hear you say that," he said. "It is the right way of looking at things. Now, my brother has told me everything that passed between you, and he has said a good deal more to me than he did to you. He feels that he gave you the impression that he denied all rights of sonship to you—that he treated you with some harshness."

He paused, and the young man said slowly: "He did make me feel that I wished I hadn't come."

"I know—I know. Well, you can see why that was, can't you? Why it *must* have been so after all those years. It wasn't only himself he was thinking of—though naturally, in his position, it would be a serious thing if it were known—by anybody who might have seen you in Roding, for instance—who you were. He is very much respected, very much looked up to—and deservedly so. It would do him a great deal of harm, and a great deal of harm to his work. But there's his family—his wife, one of the sweetest and best women that God ever made—it would be a cruel blow to her; his sons—well, they'd get over it, perhaps, but two of them are boys still. It would affect their relationship if they were to know of it; his young daughters. There's a very happy family life at Roding Rectory, and it would

be a dreadful thing if that sort of sorrow came to spoil it."

"Oh, yes, sir, I see all that. Indeed, I wouldn't be the one to spoil it; it would be a wicked thing. I would keep away; I wouldn't tell a soul that could do harm to them. I ought not to have come at all."

"Well, I don't think you need be sorry that you came. If you see that side of the question, and act on it, as I'm sure you will, there will be nothing to regret. I'm not reminding you of it only to beg you to be careful, to keep a watch over yourself, that no harm can come to all those innocent people—brothers and sisters of yours, you know. What I want you to see is that your coming suddenly on him like that was bound to strike your father in that way first of all, before he knew you—the danger you brought to him. It was only afterwards, when he had time to think, that he could see your side of it, and his own side too, as it affected you personally. If he had never known you, he might have been able to leave you out of account altogether. He has done that for over thirty years; but he can't do it now. He recognises you as his son. He told me to tell you so."

The young man showed himself moved. "I'm glad that I have seen my father," he said. "I don't want to bring trouble on him. He won't hear of me again, unless I do something that will make him think well of me."

"My dear fellow, he wants to hear of you, and he wants to help you. So do I. I can do more than he can, because I haven't got the ties that he has. Whatever I can do will be done on his behalf, because he is your father, and he doesn't want to leave you to yourself, now that you have claimed the relationship. He told me everything that you had told him, about what you had done with your life, and I was interested in it. It shows that you are worth helping. You want to go to Oxford, he says. Well, let's

talk over that. He didn't see his way to it—didn't think it would be a good thing to do. Now, I'm inclined to think it would. You would have three quiet years for reading, and no worry about having to earn your living; and after that, well, whatever you want to do we can talk over, and you can feel you have me behind you. I shall be pleased to do it. I've never had a son of my own, and you can make a friend of me, if you feel you would like to, and talk over things with me from time to time."

Sir Richard was doing it handsomely, and may have felt that he was, for if he had had a son of his own he would have borne small resemblance to this young man, who was not so very young, and had acquired characteristics that it would be too late to get rid of, whatever he did and wherever he went. Consequently, he was surprised by the almost frightened refusal with which his offer was met.

"Oh, but I don't want to go to Oxford now. I have put that out of my head entirely. And I don't want to go into the Church, either. I'm a very different man, sir, to what I was yesterday. I was full of worldly pride and worldly desires then. Please God, I've put them behind me now for ever. I can't even be tempted with what I wanted so much. It's all nothing to me now. I've found my Saviour again, sir. I've been denying him for a long time past, though I didn't know it. He will make up to me for the want of an earthly father; he will make up for everything. Oh, my heart is full of joy and peace. If you hadn't spoken to me I should have gone down with others, and it would have been a night of rejoicing. The word would have been given me. It would have gone hard with some poor sinners—with me and Jesus on the same side together. They couldn't have resisted me. He has filled my whole soul. I ought to be on my knees now giving thanks to him, pleading with him for other poor souls who

haven't yet been brought to wash themselves clean in his precious blood. I've been talking as if I had forgotten it for a time. But I don't want to think of anything now but the wonderful thing that has happened to me. Oh, sir, perhaps it was through him that you were led to speak to me. Perhaps it's his way of bringing you to him, if you haven't let him take possession of you yet. Let me talk to you. Let me plead for you at the Mercy Seat. Don't let another hour go by resisting him. Let us get on to our knees now, and ask him to show his wonderful power, and save yet another sinner. I can do nothing, but he can, bless his holy name."

His face was aflame. He poured out his words in a flood that it was impossible to stop.

But Sir Richard made no attempt to stop it. He sat back and looked at him as if fascinated, his mind working all the time, and becoming heavier as it worked. He had had no great experience of religious excitement, but he thought he knew enough about it to recognise it as a dangerous thing. A man taken in that way was not altogether responsible for his actions. This one had been talking sensibly and reasonably; and he had felt dependence upon him, and upon his word. But there was no telling what he would do, if he was like that. At any time he might get it into his head that he was called upon to blurt out everything. No considerations of right and wrong that would affect normal men would appeal to him.

And it was a shock to find that his hold over him, which he had prided himself on taking so cleverly, without showing he was taking hold at all, was gone; had not even existed. Perhaps, though, it was not too late to acquire it.

"I think you must be content to leave me alone," he said, with some dryness. "I've not lived all these years without thinking matters over for myself, and whatever faith

I may have I prefer to act on, and not talk about. But I shall be interested in hearing anything you like to tell me about yourself. What has happened since yesterday that has caused you to take such a different view of things?"

There is probably something about the military air, which Sir Richard, with his spare upright figure and close-clipped white moustache, still possessed, that is inclined to damp pietistic ardour. There was a drop in temperature as the young man said: "I know you are much above me in worldly position, sir. Perhaps you think it is an impertinence for me to talk to you about your soul. But we're all alike in God's sight, aren't we? If he has taught me something, and brought you and me together in this unexpected way, I should be denying him if I didn't speak out. If you haven't found Jesus yet—if you are still wandering in sin far from him—don't think about me; fix your eyes upon him, and he will save you. It isn't too late; it is never too late with him, praise God."

"I think the mistake you and the people like you make," said Sir Richard, in his level courteous voice, "is that you take it for granted that everybody you come across is material for you to exercise your zeal on. We are not living in a heathen country, you know. You can safely take it for granted that a person like myself isn't hearing of religion for the first time from you; and if he happens to have reached the age that I have, he isn't likely to throw over everything experience has taught him in a single moment, and accept something in its place that you have learnt during the last few hours. What is it that has changed you since yesterday? Was it finding that your father was not glad to see you? I have told you why that was, you know, and have told you, too, that he does not want to throw you over, as you may have thought."

"It was God's guidance that led me to Roding. I went

there hoping for some signs of a father's love, and he gave it me in full measure; but it was the love of a heavenly, not an earthly father, that was waiting for me there. I shall always think of Roding now as a blessed place. I had been wandering in the cold and darkness, and it was there he found me, and forgave me for my desertion of him. I shall never wander from his side again."

"What happened to you at Roding?" asked Sir Richard, concealing his growing impatience.

"God's servant found me there, and brought me to him. It was Dr. Merrow who showed me myself, and brought me back into the right way."

"Dr. Merrow!" Sir Richard sat up in his seat. "You saw Dr. Merrow! You didn't tell *him* what you had come for! Surely you didn't give Dr. Merrow your secret?"

"It is quite safe with him, sir. We hardly talked of it at all. It seemed a very small matter beside the great facts he brought home to me."

"Look here," said Sir Richard, speaking in a peremptory voice. "Just bring yourself to tell me in plain language exactly what happened. How did you come across Dr. Merrow? Did you know him before? Did you go straight to him when you left your father?"

The air of command brought him some way towards the earth. "I had met him before," he said, speaking more quietly. "When I and others got into trouble some years ago, he was near by and he talked to us—oh, so lovingly and kindly. It did me far more good than punishment could have done. He brought us to our knees. Oh, if I had only——"

"Yes, yes. Never mind about that now. Then you knew he was at Roding, and went to him?"

"No; I didn't know he was there, and I didn't go to him. God sent him to me. I was walking along the street,

troubled in spirit, and cast down, and I lifted up my eyes and saw him coming towards me. It was like seeing an angel from heaven."

"He recognized you?"

"I stopped him, and told him who I was, and his face lit up, and he put his hand on my shoulder, and all of a sudden I broke down, just as we were, there in the street."

"H'm! Did anybody see you?"

"I wasn't thinking of that. There were people in the street, but it was too sacred a moment for me to care about what they might have thought about me."

"I suppose so. You wouldn't be likely to care what they thought about anybody else. Was this immediately after you left the rectory? Had anybody seen you coming from there?"

"No: I had come out through the grave-yard, and crossed over to the other side of the street."

"Very well; what happened then?"

"Dr. Merrow saw that I was much moved, and I think he cast about in his mind where he should take me. We went down a side street to his chapel. They have fitted him up a little room there, which he sometimes uses, and he took me into that. He talked to me there and prayed with me. It was a blessed time. The Christian love and tenderness that he showed——"

"You told him everything—what you had come to Roding for—about your father. What did he say to that?"

"He said very little. It was of such little importance, he——"

Sir Richard showed strong irritation. "Can't you bring yourself to see," he said, "that to me—to your father—it is of the greatest possible importance? When this religious change comes over a man does it *always* make him as blind and selfish as it has made you? You can think

and talk about nothing but yourself. For God's sake, put yourself aside for a moment and try and think of others."

He descended a little further. "I don't want to be selfish, sir," he said; "and I hope to spend my life in the service of others. But when a wonderful thing like this has happened to you, you don't seem able to think about anything else."

"So I see; and it doesn't attract one very strongly towards the experience, or those who undergo it. Ordinary people are inclined to look for something special in the way of consideration for others from those who claim to stand on a pinnacle above their neighbours; and they very seldom see it. Not long ago you showed yourself sensible and high-minded about the difficulties you have brought into your father's life and the trouble you may be the means of bringing to his wife and children. Now you talk of it as if it were of no account at all—and they were of no account in comparison with yourself."

"But that isn't my feeling, sir. I think just the same as I did about them. I couldn't bring trouble on them. I am so happy now in myself that I should——"

"Well, make an effort and put yourself and your happiness aside for the moment. In thinking about that and nothing else you may have brought trouble upon them already. Tell me exactly what was said and how it was received."

"Dr. Merrow asked me about myself and what I had been doing since he had seen me, and I told him. He didn't seem to be surprised to meet me in Roding, but when I told him that I had thought of joining the Church, and we had talked about that, and he had made me see how unworthy all my ideas had been, and how wrong it was of me to go outside the way God had appointed me to serve him in, he asked me who I had seen about it, and I

mentioned something that my father had said. I didn't call him my father. I have never done that before talking to you; and yesterday, after I had seen him, somehow I didn't seem to think of him as my father, but just a clergyman in the Church."

"Do you mean to say you referred to him—to something he had said to you—without having it in your mind what he was—what had just passed between you—what you had gone to Roding for? Surely that's impossible!"

"No, it wasn't quite like that, sir. My mind was disturbed; I suppose at the time I wasn't thinking that Dr. Merrow didn't know everything. It was all part of the same thing. I said that Mr. French—that's what my mother always called him to me—had said that I ought not to be thinking of joining the Church in the way I did."

"Ah!" This was what would happen. The mind full of other things; no thought of prudence or self-control; the secret at the mercy of anybody.

"Well, how did he take it? Tell me his exact words if you can remember them?"

"I think he was surprised that I knew Mr. French, and then I told him the story. He tried to stop me when I had gone a little way; but I had to tell him everything, so that he should understand."

"Understand *you*! Yes, of course that was the only thing that mattered! You throw your father over—blurt out his secret in the very place in which it can do him most harm—probably to the very man who will make use of it to do him harm. It was a base and selfish thing to do."

"Oh, but you can't know Dr. Merrow if you say that of him. He wouldn't make use of a secret to do anybody harm!"

"I don't know him. Did he give you any undertaking that he would keep what you told him to himself?"

"I see now, sir, what you are thinking of. You think that Dr. Merrow, living in Roding, may tell other people there of my father's sin as a young man. But——"

"Why, what on earth do you suppose I'm thinking else? Have you lost your senses entirely?"

He came finally to earth for a time, passing his hand across his eyes, and leaning back in his seat. When he spoke again it was in the reasonable submissive tone he had used before.

"I will try and make it as plain as I can," he said. "If you don't know Dr. Merrow, I suppose it is natural that you should blame me for telling him anything. The idea that he would tell anybody else what I told him never entered my head; and if you knew him you would know that he *couldn't* do such a thing. I would have confessed a murder to him with just as much faith in his keeping silence. I never thought of asking him to keep it to himself."

"Well, *you* have confidence in him. Now you have to make me feel the same confidence. Tell me how he received your statement."

"He looked very grieved, and asked a few questions to make sure I was making no mistake. Then he said: 'It is a sad story—sad not only for you but for your father. You won't want to think of it more than you can help.' And then he went on to talk of other things. It was not mentioned again."

If he could be trusted to have told the whole truth, it looked as if he had some grounds for his confidence. Sir Richard knew that a priest would never disclose anything that he might have heard in confession. He did not know whether a man in Dr. Merrow's position would so consider himself bound to silence; but it seemed that he had taken the confession in the right spirit. He would have to think very carefully over what could be done, if anything.

"Well, I hope you may be right," he said; "and I also hope you may not consider it necessary to make any more confessions of that sort. It isn't your secret to give away, you know. We've had that out. As far as you are concerned, it's your mother's, and you ought to have kept it. It had nothing whatever to do with what you seem to have consulted Dr. Merrow about, and from what you say he seems to have seen that."

"He is full of wisdom, as well as loving-kindness."

"Quite so. And you might take a lesson from him in that respect. You haven't shown much wisdom—or loving-kindness either, except towards yourself. However, the mischief is done now, and there's nothing to be gained by harping on it. I shall feel more at ease, though, if you will give me your definite promise to keep the secret absolutely from henceforward."

"I will promise that, sir. It will be put out of my mind. Now my conscience is clear again, my way lies plain and straight before me. My orders have been given me, and I shall spend myself on the Lord's work, and on that only."

"What are you going to do—become a preacher?"

"Yes. I am going back to the life that was shown to me once before—the life that I ought never to have left."

"Still you did leave it, and you might want to leave it again. I suppose neither your father nor I can be of much use to you at present; but if you are inclined at any time to change your mind, we are ready, you know, to help you on."

But he was strong in his determination to renounce all desire for worldly advancement. He had been unfaithful once before; he would not be so again. He was not relying on his own strength.

Sir Richard, during his outbursts of aspiration, which brought again the look of the fanatic into his eyes, and the

tones of the fanatic into his voice, considered that there was nothing more to be done with him, or for him, for the present. When the edge of his fervour became blunted, he might have it in him to tread his path none the less surely, or he might not. He had already left it once. In case of his doing so again it should be impressed upon him before they parted that he could always look to him for help if he wanted it. That was all that could be done.

As his tones ran higher, and he seemed to be bringing himself to the point of making another attack upon his companion as a possible convert, Sir Richard announced that he was going to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIV

SIR RICHARD AND DR. MERROW

"DR. MERROW, you and I are near neighbours, and I hope we are going to be friends. But there is something between us that has to be faced first."

Sir Richard was sitting under the limes in Dr. Merrow's garden. He had come to pay his first visit, and they had talked for a few minutes without anything much having been said on either side. Mrs. Merrow was in London for the day, and Charles had gone off for a long ride on a bicycle.

"Yes; if you know what has passed," Dr. Merrow said simply, after a long pause.

"I went down to Swansea two nights ago. I heard all that had passed."

"What is it you want to say to me, Sir Richard?" asked Dr. Merrow, lifting his grave eyes.

What *did* he want to say? He had talked matters over with his brother, who, although deeply troubled at what had happened, had said that it was impossible to ask Dr. Merrow for a promise of silence. Sir Richard had agreed with him, but had said that if he saw him and talked to him he should be able to judge whether or no he intended to keep silence.

"I have already said what had to be said," he replied, a shade brusquely. "We couldn't meet on equal terms if you didn't know that I knew that you had seen my brother's son."

Dr. Merrow thought again, long and earnestly, and Sir

Richard waited, determined that the next word should be with him.

"You are anxious," he said at last, "for some assurance from me that the story I have heard shall not be repeated."

Sir Richard was rather taken aback. "I should never have asked you for such an assurance," he said.

"Well, you have it, Sir Richard. I can think of no circumstances that would make it right for me to tell others what was told me in such sacred confidence."

Sir Richard had not had to wait long to form his judgment as to how this man would act. But he had not thought that a statement which should have relieved him of his fears would make him feel somewhat shame-faced.

His fears had not been small. It was owing to Dr. Merrow that the young man had plunged into the excitable undependable state in which he had found him. He could hardly have avoided the belief that Dr. Merrow would regard that state as desirable, would be at least liable to be taken by the same excitability himself, in which case he would be as little dependable as his disciple.

"You must forgive me," he said, "for thinking it possible that you could act otherwise. My brother didn't think it; but he knew you, and I didn't; and the fact is that I could put so little reliance on—on—Evans, I suppose I must call him, that I don't know what to think."

"I can talk to you about *him*. You won't want me to talk about anything else."

It was Sir Richard's turn to think. "I don't know that I want my brother left out of account," he said. "I'm a plain sort of man, and if I have to pick my way carefully so as to leave out what I'm chiefly thinking of, I shan't make much of a hand of it."

Dr. Merrow looked at him more carefully than he had

done yet. His face was of the ordinary good-looking expressionless type that might have been expected from one of his up-bringing and environment; but there was straightforward honesty in it, and now there was a look of trouble, which touched Dr. Merrow, as if he had seen it on the face of a puzzled child.

"I know that it must be painful to you," he said, "to feel that I know of something in your family that you would not wish known. You think that I might be inclined to sit in judgment. It was because I so shrink from that, even in my own thoughts, that I was unwilling to refer to it at all. Perhaps it will be enough if I say that my feelings are very tender towards your brother. I feel deeply for him. It has caused me great pain to know what he must be suffering—so much so that I have wished I could go to him. Now that you have made it possible for this to be mentioned between us, and I could do so without being misunderstood—I don't know—perhaps I couldn't go to him; but you will tell him that there is nothing in my heart but sorrow for him—and—and—love."

He had hesitated over the word. He felt it, but he knew that such expressions of feeling were outside the code of such men as the one who sat before him, and the one towards whom this one was used.

But Sir Richard's nature was simpler than his brother's. In his long, lonely wanderings he had come closer to realities, and he was less bound by conventions. He would have detected insincerity in such a speech, if it had been there, and closed up against it. As it was, he felt strongly drawn towards this man, who was so different from what he had imagined him to be. He had brought a sense of comfort to bear on the tense difficult situation—of human sympathy and understanding. He had thought to find danger, and had found support instead.

But the real man whom he saw seemed strangely to have escaped his brother. The Rector had talked of Dr. Merrow as a kind and, on the whole, a wise man—a gentleman by training, who might be expected to act as such—not without criticising him. He had some of the ways of the dissenting preacher—Pharisaical would be too strong a word to use, perhaps, but there was a tinge of it, as in all of them; in his position it would be too much to expect that he would not make use of his knowledge, at least to the extent of holding a righteous nose in the air over a man of whom he had some cause to be jealous, even though he had disclaimed any such feeling. If Dr. Merrow were to go to him, he would almost to a certainty be misunderstood.

"I am very glad to hear that you feel like that," Sir Richard said. "It is what I feel myself. This bringing up of what happened thirty years ago when he was a very different man to what he is now—he wasn't a man at all, only a boy of twenty or so—it has thrown him out of his reckonings altogether. It would have been bad enough if he had been in the position that I am, for instance. There would have been his wife and children to think of. It would make it all the worse their being what they are; my sister-in-law has a sort of—innocence—I don't know what to call it—she has such a character that you can't tell how the blow would strike her. And the children are everything you could wish them to be, and they all look up to him, as they ought to, in the way he has brought them up. I don't think it is too much to say that the mistake he made in his youth steadied him, and had something to do with the serious way in which he has taken his life, and all his responsibilities, since. I know he has never forgotten it. Then this comes that may upset it all."

"Yes, I have felt all that. He is going through a black

time. He is wounded for those who are dear to him. Indeed he is very much to be pitied."

"And that isn't all. He is bound up in his profession. You know how these things go with people like us. There's a family living; a younger son is put into it as a matter of course; there's a good house, and so on, and something to do; he is expected to behave himself and do his duty, and that's about all. But my brother hasn't taken it like that. It has been the chief thing with him. He has made a great difference in Roding. It's a better place than it was before his time. Now he is asking himself whether all he has spent his life in doing is to be upset, and all sorts of other questions about his work which I can't follow, but which show how distressed he is."

"Yes, he must be going through a time of self-questioning. But he will come through it. No work done for God can be spoilt. It is in his hands, and cannot be rejected, even if the agent seems to be so."

"Well, perhaps that isn't much consolation if the agent feels himself cut off. Perhaps I can't look at these things quite in the same light as you do. I can see what my brother has done in his parish, and outside it, too, and I can see what an upset will be caused all round if scandal is to be attached to his name. And that isn't all he is thinking about, either. I think that if I had been in his place it would have been—that and my wife and children. But he is thinking about this son of his—what's to become of him—what he can do for him."

Dr. Merrow roused himself. "I think I can help there," he said. "His son's path has been marked out for him for some years, and he will take it now. It will hardly cross that of his father, but if he is solicitous for his welfare, he may be assured that there are those who have always had it at heart, and will still help him if he wants help."

"I understood that he was going to take up preaching—I suppose in Wales. If one could be sure of his sticking to it, perhaps it would be the best thing. But he came to my brother with other ideas, and such as they were I don't know that they won't recur to him. He thinks they won't now; but when he has had time to get over his excitement a bit, it wouldn't be surprising if he were to give it all up, as I understood he did once before."

"I hope not. I think not. He will not be without encouragement when, as you say, the first fervour of his determination may be lessened—encouragement and help. We all need it, weak as we are, when our wings droop and we come near the earth. But God's strength is often shown in those very times of weakness. In this case my own faith is strong. It is the right course for him to take—that was made plain to me. He will not be forsaken in it."

It seemed to Sir Richard that there was a trace here of the young man's own emotionalism; and he had small faith in emotionalism as a guide to action, and none at all as a guarantee for perseverance.

"I was ready to help him on," he said, "on my brother's behalf. My brother felt that as the truth of his parentage had become known to him, he couldn't leave him to himself entirely; and I was ready to do what he couldn't, and——"

Dr. Merrow interrupted him. "Sir Richard," he said, leaning forward in his chair, and speaking more quickly than his wont, "I think I can see more clearly here than either you or your brother. This young man has been brought up without a father's care; he knew not that he had a father. He has been trained, and helped on his way by those who made up for him in part for his orphanhood. It is they who have a claim on him now, and they who have the right to advise him."

Sir Richard felt a little uneasy. "As for his becoming a Churchman," he began; but Dr. Merrow interrupted him again.

"That is a temptation," he said, "that comes to some of us in our youth, which you would hardly understand. In some cases it is a temptation of the devil; in most cases at least a temptation of the world. Here it was a clear case of temptation, and all desire for it was driven away when his eyes were once opened and he came back to himself. Even your brother saw it in the light of a temptation, although no doubt he believes that his Church has more of the truth than mine."

"He said he wasn't fit for it, and told him so."

"Then he must be content, and you must be content, to stand aside. I wouldn't say a word to add to his distress, but rightly or wrongly he gave up his rights of fatherhood even before his son was born. He is too good a man to fall back upon the bargain that was made, now that it has been broken to his detriment. He is even now casting about in his mind for something he can do to atone to this poor son of his who has learnt the truth. He can do nothing; it is too late now. And you can do nothing. All you could do would be in the way of some worldly advancement, and that, knowing him and taking full responsibility, I reject for him. We have him now, and we must keep him. He has given up his soul again, and it must not be tampered with further."

They were strong words, delivered not without a trace of the excitement that Sir Richard looked upon with such misgiving. But he did not misunderstand them. It was not a case of Dissent fighting jealously for a man of mark against an encroaching arrogant Church. The prize was one which nobody who gained it would have much reason to be proud of. He did not even see in the claim what

the Rector would certainly have seen—a fanatical claim of superior virtue.

“If you think about the poor chap like that, of course you are right,” he said. “I will interfere no further. I’ll leave it to you. And so will my brother. It’s the best thing we can do. If money is wanted for any further training or what not, you won’t misunderstand me when I say I shall be glad if you will come to me. I shouldn’t offer it as a set-off against anything you are doing, or are going to do.”

Dr. Merrow leaned back in his chair, the tension relaxed. “If you like to send me a subscription towards a Students’ College we are building,” he said with a smile, “I should not refuse it.”

“I will send you a cheque,” said Sir Richard. “Under the circumstances, you had better enter it as from ‘A Friend.’ You have made me feel I have a friend in you, Dr. Merrow—I and my brother, too. I hadn’t looked for so much kindness and understanding. I won’t say any more, except that I hope we shall come to know one another better still. We’ve made a good beginning.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE HOLIDAYS

AN exhaustive study of time-tables, an early rise, and a taxi-cab driver bribed to exceed the speed limit between London termini, enabled Ronald French to lunch at home on the first day of the summer holidays. It was with deep satisfaction that he found himself surrounded by the amenities of the rectory. The food seemed to him superlatively good. The appointments of the table satisfied his artistic tastes; and the windows open to the garden symbolised a freedom to which no bounds were at present visible. Some visits were to be paid later, but in the meantime Roding Rectory would afford all that a schoolboy home for the holidays could demand in the way of amusement.

Ronald was going to lose no time in getting into it. "First of all I shall have a talk with little mother," he said. "Then I'm going to dig out George, and see what's going on in the world of cricket. Then I'm going round to look up a few of the parishioners. Then I'm going to take Joyce and Eddie on the river. Then we're going to play lawn tennis, and that will bring us to dinner-time, when I hope and trust there'll be an ice-pudding. After that we'll see. We might have a little family Bridge, if we feel well enough."

The talk between mother and son took place in the garden, where they strolled arm in arm up and down the long walk.

"Mother, I want to know about Sylvia. Is she going to marry the Earl of Henley Regatta, or not?"

"Why, Ronnie, what do you know about that?"

"My dear, I know more than you'd think about lots of things. I've got a pair of eyes, you know, and a pair of ears. Are we going to have another Earl in the family?"

"Well, if you know that there was a chance of it——"

"Oh, of course I know that! *He* wanted it; but Sylvia didn't. She was to see how she liked him. *I* think he's all right, you know, though perhaps a trifle on the venerable side for Sylvia."

"Oh, Ronny, he's only thirty-five. I'm much older than that, you know, and you don't call me venerable yet."

He stopped and embraced her. "You're the youngest and most beautiful thing there is," he said. "It is refreshing to have you again. I don't think I can go away from you next term. I must stop at home and have a governess. But you haven't told me about Sylvia. I suppose she isn't going to marry him, or you'd have said so."

"Nothing is settled. She likes him: but she doesn't want to leave us, you know, Ronnie. We are very happy at home here, aren't we?"

"I should think we were. It's perfectly beastly having to go back to school. Still, Sylvia must marry some time or other. We don't want to see her an old maid."

"Darling Sylvia! There is plenty of time. I don't want her to marry yet. I shouldn't know what to do without her."

"I suppose he'll meet her in the autumn when she goes visiting about."

"Oh, I suppose so. And perhaps she will have to make up her mind then. But I am glad nothing has happened yet. Although we are not going away these holidays, Sylvia and I have been looking forward to them just as much as you have. Perhaps another year we shan't be able to have

our holidays altogether. Ronnie, I hope you have been working well this term."

He looked at her and laughed, and after an attempt to keep serious she laughed, too. "I think you are very impertinent," she said. "But I am so glad to have you back that I can't be angry with you. Now you must go and pay your visits, for I have a lot to do. Who are you going to see?"

"George. I'll tell him to come and dine to-night, shall I? I'll tell him there'll be an ice pudding."

"Yes, do. And to-morrow, too. I suppose he knows that Ralph is coming home to-morrow. Who else?"

"Stenning. I want to see his dogs, and I like talking to old mother Stenning. She's so inconsequent. Shall I go and see old Mother Budd?"

"No."

He looked at her quizzically. "Has she been making mischief?" he asked.

"I can't tell you everything that has happened, Ronnie," she said seriously, "but we don't want to see more of Miss Budd than we can help; and she doesn't want to see us. There are plenty of other people in Roding."

"Oh, yes, rather! Mother Budd belongs to the feline tribe. I don't want to see her; but it used to be rather fun getting rises out of her."

If a readiness to make friends is a good quality in a parish priest, as no doubt it is, Ronald French promised well as a future rector of Roding. It had always been supposed that he would take Orders, but very little had been said about it. If he showed any marked inclination for some other profession or occupation no pressure would be brought upon him. There was Eddie as a reserve; but no pressure would be brought upon Eddie, either. It was probable that one of them would follow his father, and

Ronald was the most likely, on account of that happy facility of his for interesting himself in the details of the lives of his neighbours.

He went out into the High Street prepared for affable conversation with anybody he might meet. He told the fishmonger's boy that he was growing into a fine lad and ought to go for a soldier, and asked after his mother, who had once been a maid at the rectory. He looked in at Gosset's shop and was interested in the price of raisins, which had risen. He told Gosset that Tariff Reform would probably put that right, but admitted that under a tariff food might cost rather more. He heard from a friend in the stationer's shop that the child of a woman living in Bolter's Yard had been burnt, and went there to enquire into it. He did not know the woman, who was a new arrival in Roding, but they came together on the subject of flannelette, and Ronald was shown the burn, and agreed that it was a mercy it wasn't worse. As he was in Bolter's Yard he looked in on an old Army Pensioner who lived there, and asked a few questions about the Balaclava Charge. It was now nearly time for the children to come out to school, so he bought three pennyworth of acid-drops, and stationed himself by the school gates. He examined into the behaviour of those who congregated round him, and gave sweets to the most deserving, consuming his own fair share meanwhile. Then he went on to George's house, but not without further bursts of conversation on the way.

All the time he was thinking what a glorious thing it was to be home for the holidays. The realisation of his good fortune came over him in wafts of joy. There was not the smallest speck of cloud on his horizon. Home was delightful, and his "people" were just those whom a fellow liked to be with; there was any amount to do, with the cricket and the river and the garden and the horses, Ralph

coming home, George only just round the corner, and plenty of jolly houses and jolly people within reach. And there were all the townspeople of Roding, too, most of whom he knew, all of whom liked him and made him welcome when he came home. Roding Rectory, with all that went on in and around it, was about the jolliest place in the world. It did cross his mind that by-and-by, after long years, Roding Rectory would be his to live in, in the same way as his father lived there now. It was quite as satisfactory a lot as that which lay before Ralph. A parson's life wasn't all amusement, but in a place like Roding, where everybody knew their parson and liked him and looked up to him, there wasn't much to grumble at.

Miss Budd came along the street towards him, and crossed over to the other side as she caught sight of him. He had half a mind to cross over, too, and make her recognise him, but the remembrance of his mother's face deterred him. Apparently Miss Budd was one of the people in Roding who was not liking the Rector and his family at the moment. But one needn't take any notice of her; if she liked to quarrel it was her own loss. It could make no difference otherwise.

As he neared the French Arms, Dr. Merrow and Charles were coming up the road from "The Limes" together. Ronald had forgotten to ask about Dr. Merrow, but thought that this was a good opportunity for getting to know him. He rather liked the look of Charles, too, and wanted to find out if he was likely to be in Roding for some time. If so he would be useful for lawn tennis, and they might even put a Four on the river.

He waited for them to come up, and then held out his hand. "How do you do, Dr. Merrow?" he said. "I'm Ronald French. I've just come home. I didn't see you last holidays to speak to."

Dr. Merrow's face lit up. This frank address from a boy of Ronald's age enchanted him. He shook hands with him warmly and put the other hand on his shoulder. "I'm very glad you have spoken to me now," he said, "or days might have gone by before we knew each other. This is my son, Charles, who is spending a quiet holiday with me."

Ronald shook hands with Charles. "I was just thinking," he said, "that now I've come home, and Ralph is coming home to-morrow, we needn't be so very quiet. You were at Cambridge with Ralph, weren't you? Did you row or play cricket?"

"A little bit of both," said Charles, "but chiefly rowing."

"Yes, I thought so. I'm going to row when I get to Cambridge. We've got a pair-oar at home. Would you like to come out to-morrow morning? I'm not much good, but I'm going to row a lot these holidays."

Charles accepted this invitation, and a time was arranged. After a little further conversation, in which Ronald told them of the woman at Bolter's Yard whose child had been burnt, they parted, very well pleased with one another.

George was at his writing-table, which was covered with papers. He was very pleased to see Ronald, and accepted the invitation for dinner, but refused to go back to the rectory with him to play lawn tennis. "I've got a great deal to do," he said.

"But, my dear old boy, you ought not to be indoors on a day like this," expostulated Ronald. "I'm sure father wouldn't expect it of you."

George laughed. "I'm not doing parish work," he said. "Ralph and I have got something on together. We are looking after some boys who are going out to Australia in October. There's a lot to arrange."

Ronald had thrown himself into one of George's easy

chairs. "You're not going with them, are you?" he asked idly.

George looked at him. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

Ronald sat up. "Surely, you're not going, George?" he said.

George came up to the fireplace. "Yes, I am," he said. "I told Cousin Henry this morning. But don't say anything about it till Ralph comes down."

"But this is horrible, George. I thought father seemed rather under the weather, at lunch. I expect that was why. Are you going to stay in Australia?"

"Yes; for some years, at any rate."

"But why, George? I thought you were settled down here for years and years. Are you going to give up this house, and everything? How perfectly beastly! What on earth do you want to go to Australia for?"

George did not reply at once, and Ronald gave vent to further expressions of surprise and regret. "I was only thinking as I came down," he said, "how jolly everything was here, and sort of settled—you know what I mean. And now you're going to chuck it. Don't you like Roding, George? I thought you liked it better than any place."

"I do," said George. "I'll tell you about it, Ronald. Perhaps you are going to take Orders some day, as I have, and you'll understand; or if you don't now, you will by-and-by. Cousin Henry understands, though he's sorry I've made up my mind to go."

"I should think he was. So shall we all be. You're one of the family; it's just as if Ralph were going away."

"Well, old boy, I feel just as you do about that. It's a pretty good wrench leaving you all, and leaving Roding, too. But I've only got about half a job here. It has been all right for me for a time. I have got into the way of

things, and I wasn't ready for anything bigger. But now I think I am."

"Well, I suppose Australia is bigger than England; but I should have thought you could have found a place here where there was plenty to do, if that's what you want. You could get a living of your own in a year or two."

"I've been thinking it all over for some months," George went on. "I haven't hurried. I thought, perhaps, I might go to some big town parish. Most fellows, who are keen, start like that. But somehow I never felt that that was the thing to do. I should be like a fish out of water, and though I dare say I could stick it all right, I know I should always be hankering to get away into the open. Then I thought of going to the Central African Mission. A lot of splendid fellows go and work there. But that didn't seem right, either—for me, for a lot of reasons. So I just waited. I knew I should find the right thing sooner or later, and when Ralph talked to me about these fellows emigrating, and asked me if I knew of anybody who would care to go out with them as chaplain for the voyage, I thought it over, and then I said I'd go myself."

"Yes, for the voyage, perhaps. But why stay there?"

"Well, Ronald, it's just what I'm suited for. I'm going into the Bush. My father was Admiral on the Australian Station, you know, when I was a child, and I haven't forgotten all about it. The Bush is glorious. I shall be in the saddle half my time."

"Yes, that will be rather jolly; but you said you only had half a job here. You can be in the saddle the other half in England, at least in the winter."

George smiled. "It isn't quite the same thing," he said. "I read about a parson in Queensland the other day whose parish was as big as the whole of Scotland, and I don't think his was the biggest parish there, either. You have

to ride to get at your people. They are scattered all over the place. You go to the different stations, and you find groups of men doing various things where nobody ever gets at them. You see, Ronald, I'm not a clever fellow, but I can get on with men, and I can do the sort of things that they expect a man to be able to do in a new country. And I feel I've got something to tell them about. They are just the sort of people I can talk to. They don't get many chances of hearing about religion."

"Dear old George!" said Ronald affectionately. "I expect they'll be jolly glad to see you. And you'll be as good a man on a horse as any of them. I dare say you'll get a lot of fun out of it. I think it's beastly, you're going, all the same. You can get plenty of fun here."

"Well, it isn't the fun exactly that I'm going for, though no doubt I shall enjoy it, when I've once got used to pulling up stakes."

He threw a glance round his comfortable room, so admirably expressive of his tastes, so permanently, as it seemed, a part of his life. Ronald caught the glance, and divined something of what it would be to a man of his cousin's unadventurous home-loving disposition, to make the change he had decided upon.

He was thoughtful for a minute. "You are really going as a sort of missionary," he said.

"Well, it will be about as near to a missionary's life as going for a voyage on a P. & O. steamer would be to going on an expedition to the South Pole," said George, with unwonted brilliance. "There'll be no real hardships. I wasn't quite certain at first whether I ought to decide upon a life that will suit me so well. But I think it is just because it will suit me that it's the right one. And very likely there will be a lot of things I can do there that I haven't thought of yet. I've got more money than I want,

you know. There'll be ways that I can use it, I've no doubt. Anyhow, I'm easy in my mind now, and that's more than I've been for a long time."

Sir Richard dined at the rectory that evening as well as George. He was in good spirits, and added a good deal to Ronald's satisfaction in finding himself amongst his own people. But none the less there was a slight air of constraint to be felt. The Rector was obviously depressed, although he was as obviously trying to keep his depression from showing. Ronald put it down to the news he had heard from George, and wished George had not asked him to keep silence about it. It would have been easier if his departure could have been talked about, and the new life that he was embarking upon. Ronald felt rather depressed himself when he thought about "old George" going away. He had seemed so much a part of Roding, and likely to go on for ever, or at least as long as Ronald, at his age, was capable of looking forward. Ronald didn't want changes at Roding; it was all just right as it was.

The two elder men went into the Rector's study after dinner, and the rest of them played card games in the drawing-room, and talked; and Sylvia sang. Ronald enjoyed the quiet evening as much as if it had been filled with excitement. He kept on hugging himself over the fact that he was at home. He liked to feel himself clean and comfortable in his evening clothes, sitting in a deep chintz-covered chair in the pretty room, over which his eyes constantly wandered, while Sylvia sang the songs he liked and his mother played her accompaniments. He thought his pretty sister prettier than ever; and as for his mother, he admired her more every time he came home. He had chosen the frocks that she and Sylvia were to wear this evening, and the result gratified his artistic eye. Very few fellows had mothers and sisters who could turn out as well as his.

He would have liked the whole of Harrow School to see them this evening.

When Sir Richard and the Rector were alone together, Sir Richard said: "Henry, old boy, you must throw this unfortunate business off your mind now. You're worrying about it. Ruth told me just now that she was sure you had something on your mind. It's all over now. The best thing you can do is to forget it."

"I wish I could," said the Rector, with a groan. "It isn't all over. Read that, Dick."

He had unlocked a drawer of his writing-table and taken a letter from it, which he handed to his brother.

Sir Richard's face grew very grave and he gave a long whistle of dismay as he turned the paper over. "Anonymous!" he said. "That's bad."

DEAR SIR (the letter ran),

Your secret is known. I do not desire to add to the remorse you must be feeling, but you cannot be allowed to bring scandal to bear upon religion by putting yourself in a more prominent position than the one you now occupy. You must refuse the Archdeaconry that has been offered to you. If you do this promptly you will hear no more from

A WELL-WISHER.

The brothers looked at one another. "Who wrote it?" asked the Rector.

Sir Richard looked at the post-mark on the envelope. "Farncombe," he said. "Whoever did write it—in a carefully disguised hand—means it to be thought that it came from Dr. Merrow. Which is absurd."

The Rector looked down. "What could it matter to him whether I took the Archdeaconry or not?" he asked.

"Exactly. The scum that writes this sort of letter always makes that kind of mistake. A woman wrote this, Henry; that's plain enough from the hand. But how could

she have found out? And who is there that would do a thing like that—who would wish to injure you?"

"Marrow must have told somebody."

"Oh, no, he hasn't! He said so definitely."

"Did he say he hadn't told his wife?"

"But surely you don't suspect her!"

"I don't suspect her of having written an anonymous letter. At least, I should be very much surprised if it were proved that she had done such a thing. But she doesn't like us; she doesn't even like Ruth. I think she has told somebody, perhaps in confidence—somebody in Marrow's congregation—and——"

"Well, I don't, Henry. I don't believe Marrow has even told her. Besides, what you said just now about him would apply to his people. What difference would it make to them—your taking the Archdeaconry."

"A man like Gosset, for instance, would be jealous of my filling any place of honour."

Sir Richard had read the letter again. "It looks to me much more likely to be one of your own people who has a spite against you," he said. "'Scandal to bear upon religion.' A spiteful dissenter wouldn't write like that. He, or she, would be glad of the scandal. Is there anybody you know of who goes to church and has a spite against you?"

"Yes, there's Miss Budd. I thought of her. But how on earth could she know? She turns up her nose at the Merrows, because they are dissenters. She would write a letter like that, I believe. She would be the most likely person. But I don't see how she can have heard it from them, or how she can have heard of it in any other way, unless it's all over the place. Well, it's here to face now, Dick. I've got to go through with it. It doesn't much matter who wrote that vile letter. They won't leave it there, whatever I do."

"I'm afraid not. I'm very much afraid not. What shall you do about the Archdeaconry? The time you asked for from the Bishop is up now, isn't it?"

"I wrote to him this morning, and accepted. This decided me. After all, Dick, I'm what I've always been. It's thirty years since I made that mistake. All my work in the Church has been done since then. I can only go on with it, to the best of my ability. If it is to be brought to nothing, it will not be my doing. I shall hold on as long as I can. But I shall have to tell Ruth now. If the devil who wrote that letter wants me punished, he need do nothing further. Nothing else matters much beside that."

CHAPTER XXVI

DISCOVERIES

RONALD slipped his arm into Charles Merrow's. When he liked a person, he was inclined to like him very much.

"That's right," said Charles. "Now we shall support each other. I haven't rowed for two years. I shall be so stiff by-and-by that I shall hardly be able to hobble."

They were coming away from the town boat-house, where the rectory boats were kept. Ronald had insisted upon Charles coming back to the rectory to lunch. He admired his new friend, and wanted to show him to his family.

"Now, don't you like him, Sylvia?" he asked his sister after lunch. "Don't you think he's a nice fellow? He took an awful lot of trouble about me this morning, and says I ought to turn out quite a decent oar. He's a very good oar himself; not so good as Ralph, perhaps, but I think he coaches better. He takes more pains. You do like him, don't you, Sylvia?"

"Yes, Ronnie, I think he's very nice."

"He's amusing, isn't he? I like that way his eyes screw up when he says something amusing—rather like Uncle Richard's. Father laughed at that story of his about the Irish priest. I think father likes him, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, we all liked him, Ronnie. You liked him, I liked him, the cook liked him, the boot-boy liked him."

"How silly you are, Sylvia! Have you got your tennis shoes on? I should think he would be ready to play in a few minutes."

Charles was in the study with the Rector, who was quite inclined to like him personally, but found it a little irksome to have a member of Dr. Merrow's family enthusiastically inserted into the rectory life at that particular time. He had not seen Dr. Merrow since his brother had talked to him, and disliked the idea of seeing him. But if his son were to be welcomed at all hours—Lady Ruth had already asked him to dine that night, for she had liked him as much as even Ronald could desire—then Dr. Merrow and his wife must be asked, too, sooner or later.

But during the quarter of an hour in which they smoked and drank their coffee together the sense of embarrassment died down. Charles had something of his father's persuasive quality, and it was devoid of the pietistic phrase that had got in the way of the Rector's recognizing its charm in Dr. Merrow. He was much more a man of the world than his father, and his conversation had salt in it. He showed a pleasant deference towards a man considerably older than himself, but not of the sort that shrinks from expressing independent views. The Rector found him an agreeable companion, and almost forgot his troubles for a time in talking to him. It seemed to him plain, at any rate, that if there had been leakage at "The Limes," as seemed probable, it had not affected this well-conditioned clever young man, with his already wide experience, and his sane humorous outlook. His ripeness of view attracted the Rector; it was that of a man of more years than Charles could claim. In his state of soreness—wondering what was to come to him, and how those among whom he lived would behave towards him if his secret became generally known—it was gratifying to believe that it would make no difference here. As for Charles Merrow himself, perhaps it would not matter much whether it made a difference or not; but he was expressive of the tolerant sensible attitude that he might

hope for from those who know the world, and were indulgently disposed towards it.

"Well, I hope you will come here as often as you care to," he said, as he rose to go out into the parish. "You will find Ronald energetically disposed to all forms of exercise, and Ralph will be home this evening, and will no doubt be ready to play games vigorously. Come and help us to keep up the holiday atmosphere."

The holiday atmosphere was sufficiently in evidence during the rest of the afternoon. Myra Curtis was spending the day with Sylvia, and they and Charles and Ronald played lawn tennis with untiring persistence, and after tea went on to the river again, with the children as an addition to their party.

As the two girls were dressing for dinner, Myra said: "Sylvia, I think that new lad is rather a lamb. He is nice without trying too hard to recommend himself."

"He was awfully sweet to Joyce and Eddie," said Sylvia. "It is a good point in a man if children like him."

"Yes; and if girls like him."

Sylvia laughed. "Don't you think it's rather unfair," she said, "that men have to take such a lot of trouble to make us like them, and we don't take any trouble at all about them?"

"That's the point of view of the spoilt darling," said Myra. "I should have to take a lot of trouble if I wanted a man to like me. I did take a good deal of trouble with Mr. Merrow, and he responded affably. But he didn't really care much whether I liked him or not."

"He didn't care much whether I liked him, either."

"Well, I thought he did, rather. He looked at you a good deal. But I suppose you're used to that. You certainly did look very sweet. I think probably he was trying to find out whether you were as sweet as you looked.

Lots of girls aren't. I'm a good deal sweeter, fortunately for me; for I'm not much to look at."

"You're always saying that, Myra. Fishing for compliments, I suppose. You're a good type of healthy, happy girlhood."

"And the man will be lucky who gets me. Yes, I know. It's very satisfactory. What did you and Mr. Merrow talk about when Ronald and I were playing with Joyce and Eddie? That's a good test—what a man talks about when you are alone with him."

"About Ronald mostly. He appreciates Ronald thoroughly. And I tried him with one or two family jokes. He quite entered into them. I think he's a bright lad."

"I think so. Dad likes him awfully. He says he is very clever, but a terrible Radical. They have great arguments, but they never seem to quarrel."

"Is he like his father?"

"What, Dr. Merrow? Haven't you seen him?"

"Not to speak to, yet. Have you?"

"Oh, yes! Now he's a real lamb, of the most precious order. It's such a pity he isn't a proper clergyman. But you don't mind it when you're with him. He's like an adorable infant who doesn't know anything; but I expect he knows a good lot, really."

"What is Mrs. Merrow like?"

"Managing order. She managed Dr. Merrow away just as we were beginning to love each other. Mother likes her; she says she's a very capable woman. Hasn't Lady Ruth called on her yet?"

"Yes, but she didn't take me, and I wasn't in when she called back. Mother was a little frightened of her, I think; but she says she's very nice."

In the meantime Charles Merrow was discussing his new friends with his mother, who was sitting by the window

of his room while he put the finishing touches to his toilet.

"I think they're quite a delightful family, mother," he was saying; "I can't think why you don't like them. Have you seen the daughter?"

"I've seen her in the town. I never said I didn't like them—except Mr. French, and I don't dislike him, really."

"He seems to take himself seriously; but he warms up when you talk to him. He is genial enough. But the rest of them are a pure joy, mother. Lady Ruth is like a nice girl of seventeen."

"I know she is. In certain moods one likes to meet women who are like that. As you are here for a holiday, dear Charles, I'm glad you should like them so much."

"She seems hardly older than her daughter. I like to see a girl and her mother such good friends as those two are. The daughter is really an extraordinarily pretty girl, mother, and absolutely unspoilt. She's as nice a girl as I've ever met."

"Well, don't fall in love with her, Charles. She leads a fashionable life, and they probably have ideas in their heads for her, to which we shouldn't conform at all."

"Oh, my dear mother!" said Charles. "I'm past the calf stage—if I was ever in it."

"I don't know that you ever were. You have always been very sensible. But you're certainly not too old to fall in love, as I hope you will some day, with a suitable girl."

"Should you consider Miss Curtis a suitable girl? She was there to-day. I think she is Miss French's bosom friend. I thought her a very nice girl."

"If you fell in love with her I shouldn't be very pleased or very sorry; but nobody could say that *you* weren't suitable. They *could* say it if you fell in love with the other girl; or at least they *would*, and one doesn't care to let

one's self in for that sort of comparison. That's why I think it is rather a nuisance that the Rectory people are what they are. You meet them as equals, and know all the time that they don't think of you as equals. However, I suppose one has to put up with that in a country place, and I'm glad enough that you should have a house to go to that you like, as long as you only go there to amuse yourself."

"Well, I'm not going there with any other idea," said Charles, a shade coldly, but relented immediately, and laughed at his mother. "I shall know how to keep my place," he said.

But as he walked home late that night, under the stars, he found himself thinking of Sylvia in a way in which he had not thought of other girls who were, as his mother had indicated, beyond his reach. She had looked so beautiful, and had been so gay and friendly, that her face and figure, and the tones of her voice, returned to him like some haunting snatch of melody that sings in the brain when one has heard a long piece of music for the first time. His evening had been a very pleasant one. He and Ralph had taken to one another, and the whole family had accepted him cordially as one of themselves, a person with the same tastes, and, because of his good humour and amusing speech, as a most welcome participator in their own amusements. It was gratifying to be taken into a circle of nice people in that way, and to feel one's self so liked. The whole evening had been the long piece of music which one would look forward to hearing again with still more appreciation. But Sylvia had stood out from all the rest—her face, her voice, what she had done and what she had said. She sang in his brain now—a memory caught more insistently than any other.

Remembering his mother's words, he smiled to himself. Was he in love with Sylvia? Oh, no! She was extraor-

dinarily attractive. She was just the sort of girl he might fall in love with, if he wanted to. But he didn't want to, and he held the theory that will had a good deal to do with such matters. He had no idea of marrying yet awhile. His interests in life were enough for him, and he still had his way to make. He fully intended to make it, and by-and-by, when he wanted to marry, he would be such that it would be natural that he should take a wife from amongst the people to whom such a girl as Sylvia belonged, if he should want to. In the meantime, he was as averse to putting himself into a position in which he could be looked coldly upon as his mother could be for him. Certainly, he didn't want to fall in love with Sylvia, and as certainly he wouldn't. But she was a very pretty girl, and a very charming one; so pretty and so charming that it was even a little thrilling to think of her, and to smile at the remembrance of her speeches and her laughter, as he walked home under the stars.

Sir Richard French had not been at the rectory that day, but he had been seen in Roding. He had gone into Bolter's Yard to look at the houses there, which belonged to him, and were not such as a good landlord might be proud of, although he had done everything he could for their tenants, short of pulling them down. After that he had gone round by the lower part of the town and walked up a narrow lane which ran parallel to the High Street, and eventually emerged into it, taking a turn when it reached the wall of Miss Budd's garden, and running alongside that and the wall of her house.

Dr. Merrow's chapel fronted the lower road, and its back was towards this lane, which had risen to about half the height of the building by the time it reached it. The lane was very little used, except at the lower end, where the gates of Dr. Stenning's stable-yard faced the broader

part running into the road. On the higher side was a brick wall with no doors in it. But at the end there was a green-painted door into Miss Budd's garden. The lower boundary was a post-and-rail fence on the top of a bank, which was only a few yards from the back wall of the chapel buildings, and descended farther along into cottage yards and gardens.

Sir Richard walked up the lane and stopped behind the chapel. It was built on a narrow strip of ground, and it was evident that the accessory rooms were behind the chapel itself. There were two windows of ground glass in the back wall, the upper panes of which were made to open from a hinge in the middle, and were rather higher than the heads of any one standing in the lane. They were protected by a sort of wire cage.

Just as Sir Richard had come opposite to the chapel, a door from the stable-yard lower down opened, and Mrs. Stenning came out. He put his foot on to a rail of the fence and busied himself with his bootlace, thinking that she was going into the lower road. But she came up the lane, and he stood up and gave her a greeting.

"This seems to be a favourite place for people to do up their bootlaces in," said Mrs. Stenning with nervous volubility. "The very last time I came up the lane I found Miss Budd doing up hers, in that very place. It's a curious coincidence."

Sir Richard had much ado to keep himself from gasping. The coincidence was a good deal more curious than Mrs. Stenning had any idea of.

"Well, now, please don't tell Miss Budd, or anybody else, that you saw me doing up my bootlace," he said. "I am a very tidy person, and I don't like to be caught at it. I throw myself on your mercy."

"Certainly I won't," said Mrs. Stenning, "if you don't

wish it. It's a funny thing that Miss Budd made the same request. Oh, there now! What have I done? I've broken my word. Whatever will you think of me, Sir Richard? It slipped out before I thought of it."

"Well, you won't let it slip out again. I was just looking at these buildings. I haven't been up here since they were finished. I suppose these windows are to vestries and rooms of that sort."

"That one is Dr. Merrow's study," said Mrs. Stenning. "They fitted it up for him as a sort of introductory gift. It is really very nice. Mrs. Withers took me in to see it one day. There's a Turkey carpet and a writing-table and an easy chair, and a set of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. But it is rather dark. This is the only window, and you see they had to put wire up to prevent boys throwing stones in."

"Yes, I shouldn't want to use a room like that much."

"I don't think he does use it much. He sometimes sees people in it. He was there on the afternoon I came across Miss Budd here. We heard him talking to somebody, and she hurried me away in case we might hear what he was saying. I thought it rather delicate of her; though, of course, I shouldn't have wanted to listen. I'm going up to tea with Miss Budd now."

"Ah, I'm going the other way," said Sir Richard.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RECTOR AND LADY RUTH

"OH, Henry!"

It was a cry of pain, almost terror. She was staring at him with wide-open eyes, out of a face from which the colour had departed.

It was the bitterest moment of his life. It was far worse than he had imagined. That look seemed to remove her from him poles apart. It was as if she saw a stranger before her, instead of the well-loved companion of nearly thirty years. He had no reply to make to her cry. Of what use were excuses, or explanations? He had dealt her a blow as unexpected, as incredible to her, as if he had struck her in the face with his hand. He had destroyed the image of himself that she had set up in her mind, in her heart. It was for her to adjust herself to changed conditions; he could do nothing to help her.

He sat before her with his head bowed. She looked at him a little longer, then sank her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Her tears relaxed the tension. Her love for him—as the oncoming tide surges back, remains suspended for a moment, and then rushes forward again—flowed out. The misery in his face and bearing impelled her to comfort him. Neither of them spoke, but she dried her tears resting on his breast.

"I am very cruel, dearest," she said, taking his hand in hers. "It is as dreadful for you as it is for me. We must face it together, and get used to it"

He knew that she was not thinking of the revelations that

were bound to come. They were as nothing compared with the fact itself.

"I ought to have told you at the beginning," he said. "I wish I had."

She was silent at this. She shrank from considering what she would have done if he had told her before their marriage. It was because she knew him and loved him, after so many years of married life, far more than she had loved him when they first came together, that she was able to cope with the shame that was wringing her. And yet, this had been between them all the time, and she had not known of it. He had, and it had not affected him. She shrank from considering that too. She must cling, for his sake as well as her own, to the good she knew of him, which no past act could alter.

She asked him timid questions. She must force her feet on to unknwon perilous paths, beneath the ashes of which dangerous fires smouldered, since he had trod them. He was tortured with shame. To remove the smirch from himself, in however small a degree, he must put it on to what, in her white purity of mind, she had thought of as unstained.

The cleanness of youth. Yes, she had believed in that. She knew, of course, that there was wickedness; she had come across it only lately. But surely it was a rare thing, as rare in the case of young men, brought up in such homes as hers and her husband's had been, as it was in the case of young girls.

"Oh, no, Henry! Not Ralph! Not my Ronald!"

He had said that all young men had these temptations, and that it was to be wished, but hardly to be expected, that they should never fall.

It seemed a dreadful thing to have said, in face of that cry of pain and rejection. He had wondered many times at her innocence, stood in cleansing awe of it, and dreaded

any rude revelation from outside that would shatter it. But it had seemed to him all the time something unnatural, in the case of a woman who lived in the world, as she did—something like the ignorance of childhood, which is a beautiful thing in itself, but cannot be expected to last. And he had thought that, with this crisis upon them, unless she could be brought with whatever tenderness he could use, to see the world as it was, and not in the light of her own goodness, his own fall must appear to her a graver matter than it actually had been, under all the circumstances.

But now his mind revolted from that thought. If she could go out into the world, as she did, and keep that wonderful faith in its goodness and essential purity, it was for those who loved her to justify, not to destroy it. He saw, as he had never seen before, what an uplifting force that pure trustfulness had been in his own life, and in that of all those who had come in contact with it. If his own sons were to preserve that rare integrity, which it would sadden but not surprise him that they should lose, it would be because of the unconscious influence of their mother's love for them and trust in them. His own exhortations, his 'work' amongst his parishioners, seemed to him now a small thing beside the spirit of goodness radiating from her. What could he have done with that poor girl whom she had lately restored to herself by the force of her own pure sympathy, probably never saying a word to her in the way of admonition, but showing the tenderness and goodness that were in her, and by that example lifting her out of the mire? Even a man like Gosset, trained to suspect all fair qualities that could not be referred back to a stated experience, had been moved by contact with her. She shed light on all around her, and the essence of its flame was that white purity, and faith in the goodness of humankind, that he had thought to rest on ignorance. They did not so rest. The potential

goodness of humankind was a real thing, and could only be brought out by this loving faith. The real man was not the man when he sinned, but when he sorrowed for his sin. It was the sin that was unnatural, not the virtue.

"My dear," he said. "You are right, and I am wrong. I will make no more excuses. I sinned deeply, thirty years ago. We must leave it so. I shouldn't be worthy of your forgiveness if I didn't abhor myself for it."

She pressed his hand. No need to say that forgiveness for any wrong done to her was his already, if it was felt to need forgiveness. She could not think that it didn't, although the wrong had been done before he had known her. She could not excuse, but with all her heart she could forgive.

Her spirit lightened a little, but it was wounded deeply by the thought of another woman who had come before her, who had borne him a child before she had. Snatches of memory printed themselves on her brain—their common pride in their first-born, the tenderness he had shown her, the deep tranquillity it had added to their love for one another, the meaning it had given to it. She dared not think of all these things now, nor gauge how far this revelation had altered them, how far they were hers still to hold. There was a dreadful sense of loss in the thought that she could not rest on his understanding of them, but must puzzle them out for herself. It could never again be quite as it had been between them. Her love for him would not be less, but it must be of a different quality.

Even now, it was striving towards other channels. She took, not consciously, the higher place that she had always given to him. It was for her to put aside her own trouble, and comfort him in his; to set him right, where he seemed only dimly to see the truth of things; to help him to act aright, if there should be any call for action.

He had already told her of the exposure that now threatened them, having felt it to be the worst of what he had to tell her. But she had not seemed to think of it at all, and it did not now appear to him as the chief thing to be considered.

And yet it was serious enough. He had gone over to Medchester the day before, on a summons from the Bishop, who had asked him to withdraw his acceptance of the Arch-deaconry. The writer of the anonymous letter had not been able to rest content with it. The Bishop had received one written in similar terms. He had disclaimed the charge of acting on such information, but he had none the less acted on it so far as to put it before the Rector, who could not deny its truth. He had told the whole truth, and asked with some indignation whether it was right that a mark of disgrace should be put upon him for a fault of his extreme youth, and whether his whole clerical career, upon which the offer had been founded, was to go for nothing. The Bishop had admitted that it was hard. If the fault had been known, and the long service had afterwards taken the sting from it, there would have been no difficulty. But having been concealed, its effect would be as fresh as if it had been committed yesterday. These letters showed that it would be made public, sooner or later. The facts were in the hands of an enemy, who would not scruple to use them, especially if the honour were to be conferred. There was the scandal to the Church to be thought of. He felt the deepest sympathy, but he could not, taking everything into consideration, think that it would be wise—or right—to continue his offer.

The Rector had come away from the palace, raging, having almost quarrelled with his superior. But he knew him all the time to be right, according to his lights. They were

those he would have acted upon himself, and in the same way, had their positions been reversed.

He had felt, on his way home, that his life was ruined. The Bishop had said that his offer had not been made public. But he had hardly been able to adhere to the statement, in so far as it affected the situation. The letters showed that it was known, and as a matter of fact the whole diocese knew of it, and the Rector had already received congratulations. All his own parishioners were discussing it, and many of them had mentioned it to him. He could not now even say that he had refused the offer, and he deeply regretted the impulsiveness that had led him into this new difficulty.

But, after all, it was only part of the general situation. The discussion that would arise, when another appointment was made, would prepare the ground for the reception of the scandal, which could not be long delayed. He was powerless before Miss Budd's malignity. His brother had told him of his discovery. There was no doubt whatever about the source of the mischief, nor unhappily any doubt but that, sooner or later, it would spread. It was not in her to hold her hand, and it was out of the question to make an appeal to such a woman. Even with disgrace staring him in the face, he would not stoop to ask for her silence. Sir Richard had seen that too, although he had thought of making the attempt on his own account.

In a short time, everything must be known. Roding and the country round would buzz with the scandal. It would not be likely that anything would be said to him, but he would meet everywhere looks of curiosity, here and there of condemnation, and worst of all, of amusement. The sharpest barb was that those who would be inclined to treat the revelation with most tolerance would find something ludicrous in it—he, the priestly aristocrat, to be confronted by an illegitimate son in the shape of a Welsh ranter! He

could hear the talk over the dinner tables, when the women had left the men to their freedom of speech; the giggles in the drawing-rooms, amongst the women themselves.

It was the hurt to his pride that he nourished on his way home from Medchester. But behind it was the thought of the damage that would be done to his reputation, as it affected his labours of so many years. They had been labours for righteousness; they had stood in the forefront of his life. In his dark mood it seemed to him that their virtue would be swept away; that he would continue in them with his power brought down to nothing.

Behind that still, was the thought of his wife and family, and the effect that the scandal would have upon them. His heart failed him. It was strongly in his mind that he would give up his work, and leave Roding altogether. If only his position in the Church had been concerned, he would hardly have hesitated. His faith was at its lowest ebb; the fruits of his labours were as ashes to him; to continue them would be a sterile burdensome effort. There was revolt in his mind against the God whom he had served. If his service was to be brought to naught, after all these years of endeavour, better end it at once. It was because of it that this blow would fall so heavily upon him, and by so much as he had worked earnestly and successfully, by so much was the weight of the blow increased. His attitude of mind approached that of retort, directed vicariously against the authorities of the Church. If his willing sacrifice of time and money were to be met with this return, he would withdraw them. Let them find another rector of Roding who would do what he had done. It would not be such an easy matter.

But his ties to Roding were not only those of his rectorate. He could not go right away, and keep away, even if he were to act on dictates that were more than half cowardice. He

was his brother's heir; a stroke of fate at any time might make him squire of Roding, in place of Rector, and in the meantime it was out of the question for him to remove himself altogether. No, he must live the trouble down amongst the people with whom he was doubly bound up. But one tie might be broken, if the other could not. It might be as well to go away from Roding, for a time at least. It was for Ruth to decide. The shame could hurt her more than it would him, poor girl; and his children. He could not bear to think of them in connection with it.

In this hard and bitter mood he had come to her, and she had changed it altogether. He no longer thought of the hurt to his pride, nor of injustice done to him. He thought of his sin, as he had never thought of it before. Had he ever really repented of it? He had thought so. But a sin is not really repented of if it is self-excused, and he had been full of excuses on his own behalf. In the light of her pain and horror, the kind of excuses he had urged to himself, and even to her, were as ugly as the sin itself. It might be the opinion of the world at large that the giving way of a young man, under strong provocation, to a temptation of the flesh, was a venial matter; that if that giving way was part of a single episode in an otherwise clean life he was rather a rare pattern of virtue. But how far did that opinion become a man of his profession? Would he be prepared to uphold it? If not, then the sin was not a venial one, and he was not fit to be where he was if he held it so.

Still more was the defence untenable before her. He was ashamed of having used it.

She was speaking gently and lovingly on the point that had so exercised him. "It is too late to do anything to make up to the poor young man for what he has lost. In other ways, we can make up together, dearest Henry. It

will make us kinder to all poor souls in trouble through their own fault. Perhaps there are some of them around us here that we have not thought enough about. And it will bring you closer to the people you are trying to help, if it must be known, as you say it must. Do you think that is what is meant by Christ taking our sins upon him—that those who are in trouble about themselves can look to him because he knows all their difficulties? I suppose it can't mean quite that; but with us, at any rate, any one who has done wrong, and is very sorry for it, is of more help to others who are in the same sort of trouble than some one whom they think of as higher than themselves. Don't you feel that? I do."

If he *could* feel it! If he were to take the place amongst his people of a man who had sinned much and been much forgiven instead of the place of one to whom they must look up as an example and whose word they must obey, then his work, so far from being destroyed, would be quickened into a life that it had never had before. There was enough idealism in him to see that; whether there was enough to enable him to take up an attitude so at variance with his temperament was another matter.

But she saw nothing impossible in it. She was ready to take it with him. "It must make a difference to our lives," she said. "We are not quite what people have thought us. We can't go on in exactly the same way—I mean I can't—amusing myself, and going about everywhere. I'm sure I haven't helped you here as I might have done, dearest Henry. You have been working while I have only been enjoying myself. I don't think that I have felt I have done wrong in living in the way I have, but I should feel I was doing wrong if I went on living in that way now."

He was profoundly moved by this. She had been the best of wives and mothers. The duties of her home had always

come first with her. What she now called amusement and entertainment had been the innocent pleasures of intercourse with relations, friends, neighbours, that were natural to one of her upbringing. If ever her help had been wanted in his dealings with his parishioners, it had never failed him. As in the case of Jane Morton, it had been far more effective, because of what she was in herself, than if it had been part of a round of stereotyped duty. It had seemed to him rather an advantage that, in the double position he held in Roding, he should have represented one side and she the other. Her inability to perform the semi-clerical duties to which he had first invited her, had never troubled him. She was so right in what she was, and in whatever she did. There had been no opposition between her life and his. She had never run after pleasure for its own sake. In no way had her attitude towards life contradicted the lessons he had sought to teach, or brought rebuke upon his ministry. It had arisen naturally out of her innocence of mind and untouched sincerity. She had fulfilled her being, and the world around her was the better for it.

But that innocence of evil, which had enabled her to live a life that would have held dangers for more women in her peculiar position, was done away with now. Evil had touched her intimately. Bound up with him, she must take its burden upon her, though innocent of it herself. She could no longer live the happy life that had seemed natural for her, as the joyous life of a child is natural for it, when no pleasures it seeks for are harmful, because it has as yet no weight of responsibility from which they can be flown to as an escape. Sorrow had come into her life. In other kinds of sorrow that had touched her, such as bereavement, she had withdrawn for a time from the lighter kind of social intercourse, which would then have been a trial, not a solace. It was as instinctive to her to retire from them

under this heavier sorrow, which had the dark taint of sin in it. Part of the world's burden of sin was laid upon her; the childlike enjoyment of innocent pleasure was no longer possible as an expression of her attitude towards life.

How she rang true to every demand made upon her! It would never have occurred to him that the ordinary way of her life would need to be altered. He would rather have been inclined to say: "Go on exactly as you have always done, braving it out before the world, and hiding the hurt." So it might have been right to act, if the hurt had come from some outside stroke, some unmerited attack on reputation. But not here, where there was no defence. There would be no braving of criticism, but it would fall harmless upon those who felt themselves to deserve as much as could be brought against them. In his gratitude to her for so lovingly taking upon herself part of his punishment, he felt great relief in the thought that she would not suffer from the attitude of those about her, except for his sake.

"You have put everything right, my dearest," he said, "I have been full of revolt, full of base pride. You have shown me where the road lies—in walking humbly before God. Nothing can hurt us if we do that, though I am afraid that it will be a sad time for you—and for the children. I don't know what to think or do about that. Perhaps it is the worst of all."

But even here she could drive away his fears. She had none of her own. "We have brought up the children in ignorance of evil," she said. "I think it is the right way, whatever some people may say. There is no reason why they should know anything or guess anything. Except Ralph, perhaps. You will know what to say to him."

"Yes, I shall tell Ralph. But if that wicked woman wants to work further mischief upon us——"

"Oh, she would not do it in that way. The children will be as much sheltered from all knowledge of it as if others were concerned and not ourselves. They may know that we are in some trouble. Sylvia will, and Ronald. But they will trust me, I know. There are many things I could not tell them."

He still felt doubtful. Ronald went about everywhere in the town, and Sylvia had many friends in and around it. Miss Budd's spite was of an unfathomable quality.

"I don't say that there is not some danger," she said, as if in answer to him. "But I won't think of it before it comes. I shall know if they hear anything, and I shall know what to say to them."

At the end, he rose and took her in his arms, kissing her face, upon which the tears were still wet. "God bless you, my darling," he said. "You have restored me to my right mind again."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MISS BUDD CONFRONTED

Mrs. STENNING, taking a quiet hour of relief from her domestic engrossments, was drinking tea in Miss Budd's drawing-room. She had come prepared to "say something" to Miss Budd, to have it out with her about what was troubling her simple honest mind. But she had not done so yet. Life was particularly trying at the moment in her ramshackle home, where there were too many children, too few servants, and too little money. It was such a relief to sit quietly for a time in Miss Budd's prim but restful drawing-room, to eat and drink from a tastefully furnished tea-table, and to let her tongue run for a little without sense of responsibility.

And in accepting these lenitives from Miss Budd's hand she felt a disinclination to bring her to book. She was beginning to think that there were two quite distinct Miss Budds. The one before her, discussing a novel that she had lent to Mrs. Stenning, in what that lady felt to be a clever and improving way, and intent on seeing to it that she had a good tea, had recently expended an immense amount of time and trouble on elaborately smocking a frock for Mrs. Stenning's eldest little girl, which was now finished, and ready to be taken home. It was one of a thousand things that she did to help her friend, and she did similar things for other over-driven mothers amongst the poor of Roding. It was a great part of her life to do them. Discount her activities as much as you liked; say that it was necessary that she should employ herself somehow, being of an active

bustling nature, that her interest in the lives of her poorer neighbours contained much patronage and dictation, which was also part of her nature, that she liked plain needlework, and getting things done; say all that, and more, and yet there remained a good deal that answered to any test to which you could bring a life of benevolence. Mrs. Stenning, with her somewhat muddled brain, may be excused for finding the contradiction inexplicable. It may puzzle wiser heads than hers. Charity of deed, where there is no charity of heart,—it exists. Or is there always some charity of heart clamouring for outlet somewhere though the main channels are obstinately blocked?

Conversation between two women living in the same place could not progress for long without discussion or at least mention of neighbours. Mention of neighbors by two women in the position of Mrs. Stenning and Miss Budd must sooner or later concern itself with the rectory. Mrs. Stenning tried to keep away from it for some time. She was grateful for the frock, and for the restful hospitality, and she also liked Miss Budd extremely when she was in her non-acid mood, and knew that it would depart directly the rectory came to be mentioned. But as she was also determined to have it out, with the other Miss Budd, her efforts to direct the unruly channel of her speech became less determined, and finally, pricked on by a certain setting of Miss Budd's face as the rectory came to be rather obviously avoided, she plumped out:

"Now I want to mention something to you, and I expect you know what it is."

Miss Budd could not pretend that she didn't. Her face set finally into its pinched disagreeable expression, and she said: "I suppose you mean the way I look upon the people at the rectory. I'm quite aware that you admire the whole lot of them immensely, and don't like my attitude towards

them. You have indicated as much before, and if we are to remain friends you had much better keep your opinion to yourself. I have my reasons for what you disapprove of, and if you knew what they were you might not be surprised at the attitude I think it right to take up. I haven't tried to persuade you in any way to alter yours, and we'd better each keep our own and agree to differ."

"Well, I've tried to do that," said Mrs. Stenning frankly. "You've been a very good friend to me, and to others, and I've said to myself: 'If she takes up a position that seems to me unworthy of her, depend on it there's some reason for it that I don't know of.' But——"

"That's just what there is," interrupted Miss Budd. "But my lips are sealed. Whether you will know the reason some day, and do me more justice than you're inclined to do me now, I can't say. But whether you do or not, you won't be able to say that I justified myself by spreading scandal. If the truth becomes known, it will be let out from other quarters."

"From what quarters?" asked Mrs. Stenning.

Miss Budd was somewhat disconcerted by this question. She threw a quick glance away from Mrs. Stenning, then asked in her turn: "How should I know?"

Mrs. Stenning gathered herself together. "Well," she said, "whether it's the truth or not, I don't know, but a story is going about, and I should like to know where it does come from."

Miss Budd stared at her. There was surprise, and a shade of alarm in her face. "What story?" she asked.

"They say that a young man came to Roding a few weeks ago who told Dr. Merrow that he was the Rector's son—not his proper son, of course, but—well, you know what I mean—but *before* his marriage to Lady Ruth."

"Told Dr. Merrow!" exclaimed Miss Budd. "I never said that he told Dr. Merrow."

"Then you *did* know of it! You *have* told somebody!"

Miss Budd bethought herself. Her face gradually cleared as she did so. "Then the secret is out," she said. "I hardly thought they would be able to keep it hidden for long. And it's pretty obvious to me how it has come out. *They* wouldn't say anything, and I believed that I was the only person in Roding who knew about it—quite by chance—and I should not have said anything."

"But you *have* said something. You said just now that you never said that the young man told Dr. Merrow."

"I didn't. How should I have known that he told Dr. Merrow?"

"But you meant that you had told somebody about the young man, although you hadn't told them *that*."

Miss Budd looked annoyed. "I have told one person what I know, in the very strictest confidence," she said. "That person would not have let out what I said. If the secret is known now, it is, as I say, from another quarter."

"Was it Mrs. Bramwell that you told?"

"No, certainly not."

Mrs. Stenning seemed to be about to say something, but closed her mouth and looked at Miss Budd instead.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Miss Budd asked in annoyance. "Do you doubt my word? Did Mrs. Bramwell tell you that I told her?"

"No," said Mrs. Stenning shortly.

"Very well then. It's not for me to say where Mrs. Bramwell got her information from, but from what you have told me I think I could make a pretty shrewd guess."

"You mean from Dr. Merrow, I suppose. It's the only thing I did tell you that you didn't know before."

Miss Budd was again somewhat disconcerted, but she said: "You can draw what conclusions you like. I make no charges against anybody, but I can put two and two together. Does anybody else know of the story?"

"My husband does. He referred to it to me last night, but I didn't know then what he was driving at. You know his way of teasing."

"You don't accuse me of taking your husband into the secret, I suppose. I tell you again that if the secret is known it has not been known through me. I have known of it for a long time by the merest chance—and I have held my tongue. And perhaps my knowing of it may explain some things that you have thought wanted explanation. If the cat's out of the bag now, there's that advantage for me, that I needn't be misunderstood by my friends any longer."

Mrs. Stenning did not respond to this conciliatory speech in the way that Miss Budd may have expected. "Do you mean?" she asked, "that that is the reason why you have been down on Lady Ruth for the last six months and more, and on Sylvia, and all the rectory family? But what has Lady Ruth got to do with it? Well, poor thing, of course she's got a good deal to do with it. If she knows about it, as I suppose she does now, it must be very dreadful for her, and I do think, and I must say, that to set yourself against *her*—well, I can't help it if you don't like it, but I think it's cruel."

Miss Budd gathered herself together. "I think you are taking up a most extraordinary attitude towards me," she said, "and I *don't* like it, and tell you so plainly. You only know the bare facts of the case, and you can't possibly judge of what is right or wrong in connection with it. Besides, you are not a woman whose life is bound up with religion, and the Church, as mine is, and you cannot be ex-

pected to understand how I should regard a scandal of this sort."

"I understand goodness and kindness when I see it, as well as anybody," replied Mrs. Stenning. "There's a lot of it in you, as I've reason to know. But I can't say I see much in the way you have behaved over this. How long have you known of it, and how did you know of it?"

It was presumably the necessity of making it quite clear where she wished to stand that caused Miss Budd to reply to those questions, or at least to one of them, instead of resenting the peremptoriness with which they were put. But her reply left a good deal to be desired in the way of explicitness.

"I am not at liberty to tell you where my information came from," she said. "One hears of a good many things in connection with people in the position of the Frenches, when one—er—moves in the same sort of circles. How this disgraceful business has been kept from the knowledge of people living about here, I don't know, but——"

"Do you mean that it has been generally known outside?"

"I didn't say generally known. And really, Mrs. Stenning, I don't know what right you have to cross-examine me in this way. What I have known I have kept to myself, and if an accident has now caused it to be spread abroad, it has nothing to do with me."

"Well, you may have kept what you knew to yourself, but you haven't kept it to yourself that you had something against the rectory people. You began to turn against them early in the year. Was that when you first heard this story? It was about the time when you went to London for a fortnight."

"You can draw your own conclusions," said Miss Budd again. "It is enough for me to say once for all that, when

I found out that the Rector was not what he had always professed himself to be, I felt it right to make a stand, for the sake of my own conscience. It has not been an easy matter. I mean no offence to you, or Mrs. Bramwell, or others when I say that the rectory people are the only people in Roding who are—I don't quite know how to put it—who are——”

“Oh, you mean they are the only people of your own class in Roding. There's no offence in that. I don't profess to be of their class, or yours, either.”

“Very well, then. It makes no difference in the case of *friends*. I have certainly felt more warmly towards you, for instance, than towards Lady Ruth. But to cut myself off, as I have done, from the sort of society one has met at the rectory—well, if you can see anything at all, you can see that it must have been something of a sacrifice.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Mrs. Stenning. “But it seems such a needless one. Lady Ruth hasn't done anything wrong. If she is in trouble about this, I should have thought it was just the time to be kinder than ever. Poor thing! I *do* feel that you have been more down on *her* even than you have on the Rector.”

Miss Budd pulled herself together again. “As I have told you already,” she said in a tone of finality, “there is a good deal in this unhappy affair that you don't know of. I have defended myself from your aspersions as far as I can, and you have acknowledged that I have acted on principle; where I can't defend myself—because I can't tell you everything—you must be content to trust me—that is to say, if we are to remain friends. I have an extremely difficult course to pursue, but I am following my conscience, and that is all I can say about it.”

Whether Mrs. Stenning would have allowed herself to be satisfied with this statement cannot be known, for at

that moment the door opened and Lady Ruth French was announced.

She came into the room quickly. Her eyes, fixed upon Miss Budd, looked very big. She gave no greeting, seemed to ignore Mrs. Stenning's presence, and did not wait for the maid to close the door before she spoke.

"Oh, why do you do these wicked things?" she cried. "Your letter came just now, and I have come straight to you. Haven't you done enough harm to us? When will these dreadful letters cease?"

Miss Budd was white to the lips. She stared as if fascinated at the sheet of paper that Lady Ruth held in her hand. She controlled herself with a strong effort, but her voice shook as she said: "What on earth are you talking about, Lady Ruth? Have you gone out of your senses?"

Lady Ruth turned impulsively to Mrs. Stenning. "I suppose everybody in Roding knows what has happened now," she said. "The story has been put about by Miss Budd. If she wants to harm us, cannot she be content with that? Oh, it is wicked to write this to me. But it isn't *that* I am thinking of. What will she do next? I am afraid for my children because of her. It can't be right that they should know."

Miss Budd did not give Mrs. Stenning time to speak. Her eyes were still frightened, but some of the colour had come back to her face and she spoke with resolution.

"Please sit down, Lady Ruth," she said. "You are making a great mistake. We must talk over this. It is not true that I have put anything about."

Lady Ruth sank into a chair and burst into tears, but controlled herself quickly. When she spoke again it was in a quieter voice. She looked steadily at Miss Budd, who tried to meet her eyes, but could not.

"I have come to tell you," she said, "that this writing

of anonymous letters must stop. It is a most cruel and cowardly thing to do."

Miss Budd would not let her go on. "If you received an anonymous letter," she said, "it is not from me. It is true that I have known the story to which I suppose it refers for some time, but I have kept it to myself. I have just been telling Mrs. Stenning so. If the story has got about, it is not through me, and I will not have it said that it is. Now you have come here, we had better have it out, once for all."

"May I see the letter, Lady Ruth?" jerked out Mrs. Stenning. "It's none of my business, I know, but I do feel so sorry for all the trouble you are going through, and I should like to help you to get at the truth, if I can."

Lady Ruth handed it to her, without removing her eyes from Miss Budd's face. Miss Budd frowned at Mrs. Stenning's interference, but hastened to say: "I have known nothing about anonymous letters having been sent to anybody, but Mrs. Stenning has just told me of the story having got about, and she said something that I didn't know about it, but which shows me quite plainly *how* it has got about. I am very glad she did say so, because it is extremely awkward for me to be suspected in this way, and if it hadn't been for a name she let drop it might be difficult for me to defend myself against a most unwarranted charge."

Mrs. Stenning had read the letter, which was very short, and now looked up from it with her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright with indignation. "Miss Budd says that the information has come from Dr. Merrow," she said. "I let her think that I believed it, but I didn't for a moment. And as for his writing a vile letter like this—it's a wicked thing to say of a good man, and anybody could see that he didn't. Whoever wrote it, it wasn't a man at all. That's plain enough, though the writing is disguised."

Miss Budd looked at her angrily. "I never said that Dr. Merrow had written any letter," she said. "I knew nothing about letters being written. And I think it is most extraordinary that you should behave in this way, Mrs. Stenning. You say I told you that the information came from Dr. Merrow. I did nothing of the sort. I said you could draw your own conclusions. And what do you mean by saying that you let me think you believed so and so, when you didn't? Why should you, of all people, act in this way towards me?"

"I want to get at the truth," said Mrs. Stenning, leaning forward, "for dear Lady Ruth's sake; and you haven't told me the truth, Miss Budd. That's what I meant. And now I'll tell you how I know. Mrs. Bramwell told me the story, and her servant Emma told her; and Emma got it from your Jane. So it did come from you, and I knew it."

Miss Budd did not allow herself to appear disconcerted, though she showed annoyance. "And why on earth couldn't you have said that at the time?" she asked. "I told you that I had told one person in the strictest confidence, and that person was Jane, who is a very old servant of mine, and to whom I talk freely about many things. I had my reasons for telling her, and if it is true that she has gone and repeated what I said it was a gross breach of confidence, and I shall speak to her very strongly about it. And now you both know everything, and as far as you are concerned, Mrs. Stenning, you could have known everything before, if you had acted frankly towards me, as you ought to have done. I have known the story—yes, for some time. But I am not to be blamed for that, and I accept no blame for it. I have told one person of what I know, and I don't accept blame for that, under the circumstances. I don't believe for a moment that it is through Jane that it has

now come out, even if she did tell Mrs. Bramwell's servant, which I shall have to hear from her own lips before I believe it. You told me yourself that your husband knew. Did *he* hear it from Jane?"

She had talked herself into a state of some self-confidence, and leant back in her chair as if controlling the situation. Lady Ruth had made no effort to take part in the interchange of words, but had sat with her eyes fixed upon Miss Budd's face all the time.

Now she spoke. "You say you have known of the story for some time," she said. "For how long have you known of it, and how did your information come?"

"The very question I asked myself," said Mrs. Stenning.

"And which I answered," replied Miss Budd. "I heard of it from outside—how, I am not at liberty to say."

"How long ago?" asked Lady Ruth.

"I cannot give you any more information," said Miss Budd stiffly, "and I do not admit your right, Lady Ruth, to come here and ask me questions. What does it matter how or when? The story is not denied. Your only ground of complaint against me is that I have made use of it to damage you, and that I say I have *not* done. I have kept it entirely to myself until a very short time ago, and even if I hadn't——"

"Not entirely to yourself," interrupted Mrs. Stenning. "You have made people wonder what there was that set you against Lady Ruth and her family."

"As far as that goes," said Miss Budd, "I do not choose to be brought to book, as I told you. I say nothing to Lady Ruth about what has come out, but I am entitled to my own opinion on it, and to act on that opinion."

She was now quite herself again, taking up a very superior line, and prepared to carry it through.

"Then do you say that it was because of this that you

have stood aloof from us for some months past?" asked Lady Ruth.

"I say nothing," replied Miss Budd, "I deny your right to question me upon the subject at all."

"I can answer the question," said Mrs. Stenning. "She heard whatever she did hear when she was in London in the early Spring, and she didn't think it right after that to be friends with the Rector any more—or with you, Lady Ruth, though goodness knows why, and I told her so."

"I did not tell you that," said Miss Budd with lofty forbearance. "I said you could draw your own conclusions."

"It comes to the same thing," snapped Mrs. Stenning.

Lady Ruth threw out her hands. "Oh, how horrible it all is!" she said. "If there had been any possibility of doubt this would have destroyed it. The story was known to nobody until my husband's son came here a few weeks ago. There was no one in London you could have heard it from. We know how you heard it. He told Dr. Merrow in his room behind the chapel, and you listened from the lane. You were seen there at the time. Why, it was Mrs. Stenning who saw you, and told Sir Richard. There was no other way in which you could possibly have heard it."

Miss Budd had gone white again. She cast a look of malevolence at Mrs. Stenning, upon whom enlightenment suddenly seemed to dawn.

"Of course that was it!" she cried. "I see it all now. Oh, what wickedness, and what lies! And to write that letter! And to try and put it on to Dr. Merrow! Well, you may pray to God to forgive you, Miss Budd, but now you've been found out I don't think anybody else will."

Miss Budd moistened her dry lips. "I deny it all," she said, in a voice that carried no conviction. "I admit now that circumstances make it look as if it had happened

as you think it did. They were most unfortunate for me; but I'll just ask you one question, Mrs. Stenning. If I had learnt what I knew in the way you say, and wanted people to think I had learnt it in some other way, should I have been so foolish as to have mentioned Dr. Merrow's name? I did *not* mention his name. I heard it first from you this afternoon. If you don't believe me, ask Jane. I will have her up now, and make her tell you exactly what I told her."

She made as if to rise from her chair, but Lady Ruth rose at the same time. "No," she said. "I will not have a servant brought into it. I have said what I have to say. You have done your mischief. The sad story, which concerns my dear husband's life of more than thirty years ago, is in everybody's mouth now. I would not lift a finger to try and hide it—except from our children. That letter shows that you were willing to wound me with it, if you thought I didn't know; and if you could write that to me, you could write to my daughter, or to anybody. I don't think you will do so now, so I need say nothing more to you."

She went out of the room. Mrs. Stenning and Miss Budd were left confronted.

Miss Budd gulped in her throat. "When she has come to herself," she said. "I shall go to her. She is completely mistaken, and so are you. But at present I own that it looks as if I had done what she thinks I have. It is very——"

A burst of hysterical tears cut short her utterance. She sank back into her chair and hid her face in her hands. Mrs. Stenning stood over her like an avenging angel.

"Ah, you may well cry," she said. "I've done with you. You've done me many a kindness, and I shan't forget it; but there are some things nothing can make up for. It's

only because you *can* be kind that there's some hope you may come to see how wicked you've been over this. I *know* you wrote that letter. It isn't the paper you generally use, but you used it once, writing to me, and I should know the tails of your y's anywhere. As for not mentioning Dr. Merrow, perhaps you didn't; but it won't save you, because several people saw him talking to the young man in the street, and, of course, what's happened is that they've put two and two together."

She looked down upon her one-time friend, still sobbing uncontrollably, and her face softened a little. "Come now, Miss Budd," she said. "Make a clean breast of it. I'll stick to you, if you tell the truth, for all you've behaved so badly. You'll want a friend when this becomes known."

Miss Budd held back her sobs and looked up at her with anger. "It's *you* who have brought this upon me," she said. "Go out of my house. I never want to see your face again."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE STORY SPREADS

WHETHER it was true that Miss Budd had told the secret only to her elderly maid, and to nobody else, was never made quite plain. It seemed almost impossible that it should have spread so quickly through this single channel, but Jane was an inveterate gossip, and no other prime source was ever traced. She seemed to have gone straight out from her mistress' presence and told as many people as she could get hold of. She indignantly denied that she had given any promise of secrecy whatever. Miss Budd had not asked for it, according to her. She had said: "Don't say that the story comes from me, whatever you do. I don't want to be mixed up in it. I think you had better keep it to yourself, but I tell you the truth about it, because it is bound to be known sooner or later."

Jane had taken this speech to mean that she was invited to be the mouthpiece of the revelation, but that her mistress wished to have a loop-hole through which she could disclaim responsibility for spreading it, and the advice not to repeat it need not be taken seriously. It was too big a plum for such a confirmed gossip to resist, and she would not have taken it amiss that she should have been to some extent thrown over, if it had not been for the indignation that was aroused when Miss Budd's part in the affair became known.

Sir Richard was responsible for the spreading of the truth about her. He took a leaf out of her own book, having in his service a gossip as keen as hers. "Now you

needn't say I told you to keep this to yourself," he said to his servant, William. "I don't want you to keep it to yourself. Go and spread it everywhere, and let people know what sort of a creature this is who's so careful to look after their morals. Tell them about her lies; tell them about her spite; tell them about the way she carried out her dirty tricks so that they might look as if they had been done by somebody else. By God, the woman ought to be hounded out of the place. She'll go, I should think. There won't be a door open to her when this gets known."

But Miss Budd had already gone. It was her custom to spend the month of August at the seaside. She had put off her holiday this year, having affairs on hand in Roding, but the day after her exposure, complete and convincing enough, in spite of her persistent denials, she had left Roding for Whitby, where she was probably considering whether it was possible for her ever to come back again, or if she had not better remove herself to some other place in which there was opportunity for looking after the moral and material welfare of the inhabitants, and a church after the pattern that she affected.

It was just as well for her that she had run away. While Roding, on the whole, was inclined to welcome a story that added spice to existence, it was in arms against Miss Budd in all quarters. The church people, and many others besides, were scandalised at her attack upon Lady Ruth, who, at least, was innocent, and to be pitied. The chapel people were furious at the mean attempt to saddle Dr. Merrow with the odium of her spite. It came out that she had walked over to Farncombe to post letters. Indeed, the postmistress of that village, being possessed of her fair share of curiosity, had informed herself of the destination of the last letter that Miss Budd had dropped into her box. It was the one to Lady Ruth, and completed the proof of

her guilt, if further proof were needed. The only thing that puzzled the quidnuncs was the reason for her enmity towards the Rector's family. The little episode of the lost invitation card was not known, and opinion was divided between the possibility of her really having heard something of the story before the occasion of her eavesdropping, or of the Rector having found her "a bit too much" and having given her a piece of his mind. She was, at any rate, a bit too much for the inhabitants of Roding, and even those who had "received benefits from her turned against her, and looked forward to giving her a piece of their minds whenever she should reappear amongst them.

It may be said here that she did not reappear. Mrs. Stenning, relenting towards her so far as to wish to preserve her from a hostile demonstration, wrote to her when the indignation against her was at its height. She told her of the evidence of the Farncombe postmistress, and gave her a selection of the speeches she had heard directed against her in Roding, which in some cases amounted to threats of violence. She also told her of speeches reported by her husband from the houses around Roding, which made it quite plain that the circle of acquaintance that she had built up with such anxious and long-continued effort was now destroyed beyond repair.

It must have been very unpleasant reading, and it is doubtful whether Mrs. Stenning's concluding paragraph, in which she expressed a hope that her one-time friend would repent of her evil work, sweetened the dose. And yet, if there was any sincerity in Miss Budd at all—and who can say that any single human being who professes and practises a religion which includes some self-examination and some self-denial, is entirely without sincerity?—she must have come to see that the exposure of her malice was not the worst thing about it. But whether she did or not, she ap-

peared no more in Roding, not even to pack up. The lease of her house would expire in the following summer. The house was emptied of her effects, and stood for a time with the bills in its windows as a visible sign of the retribution that occasionally treads sharp on the heels of wrongdoing.

But while popular indignation against Miss Budd mitigated to some extent the effect of the revelation as it applied to the Rector, he was not to be envied at this time.

It was not to be supposed that a story, told at second, third or fourth hand, and impossible to be checked by any statement from those principally concerned, would run its course without misrepresentation. It was more generally supposed than not that the Rector had all along been in communication with his natural son, and had paid regularly for the support of his mother. Those who preferred to believe the worst—they were divided about equally between regular church-goers and regular chapel-goers, the outside world taking an easier and more tolerant attitude—hinted at the running of "two establishments." It was generally agreed that the appearance of the son at Roding had the air of blackmail, and opinion was divided between approval of its being refused and condemnation of a father for casting off his son. "There's plenty of money. The young folk at the rectory have all *they* want, and nobody grudges it to 'em. Should have thought he might have found something for his own son who came into the world before all of them, anyhow. It wasn't *his* fault, poor beggar, that the banns wasn't asked over his mother. *We* have to pay up, if we make a mistake of that sort. Illegitimates has pretty much the same chance with us as legitimates. It seems a bit 'ard, but o' course, the gentry 'as the best of it all round."

That was about the worst that was said by the non-religious world of Roding, as apart from the anti-religious

world, which was almost a negligible quantity. The head of it was Morton, who slapped his muscular thighs with satisfaction and roared with laughter when he first heard the story.

"Well, there now! That's a rich bit, that is! If that doesn't beat all! But there, they're all alike! Spends their lives in interfering with other folks, and bringing up all they can against them if they don't see things just in the same light as they do, but when it comes down to human nature, they're no better than anybody else. In my opinion they're a —— sight worse, 'cos they're pretending all the time, and keeping things hid that other folks owns up about."

On further consideration, however, Morton modified his attitude of criticism against the Rector. He could see a little farther into the truth of things than most men of his sort, and the result of his cogitations was that he appeared one evening at the rectory in his best clothes, and asked to see the Rector.

Dinner was not yet over, and he was kept waiting for some little time in a room which the Rector used chiefly for interviews with his poorer parishioners. The delay did not displease him at all. There were some copies of the *Guardian* on the table, and he found food for his sardonic humour in the pages of that periodical.

The Rector came into the room with his usual air of dignity, but there was a hint of defence in it, and his face showed other signs of the trouble he was going through. Morton saw them. He put his paper aside, rose from his chair, and stood with his hat in his hand.

"I've come to say a word to you, sir," he said, "what I've been thinking over for some days. If you're inclined to think it's a bit o' cheek on my part, well, you can kick me out, and no 'arm done; but you and your good lady—

especially 'er—done well by me and mine, when we 'ad to face somethink disagreeable, and I thought it wouldn't come amiss if I was to say to you now, as man to man, that I'm sorry for the trouble as 'as overtook you, and it ain't so out of the question as it looks that I might be able to lend a 'and to see you through it."

The Rector looked rather at a loss to know what to make of this speech. He took a chair and said, "Sit down, Morton," and waited for him to speak again.

"First place," continued Morton, "there may 'ave been one or two things said when we 'ad that little talk in Mr. Gosset's back parlour, back in the winter-time, that I should wish forgot. I'm a man what reads a bit and thinks a bit, and I've a way of expressing myself against them in positions like yours as can't always be agreeable for them to listen to. But what I prides myself on is fairness—fairness; and when I finds a man acting *fair* all round, why, I don't mind 'im 'olding a few what I think of as superstitions, when it don't blind 'im to what's right and what's wrong."

The Rector was about to speak, but Morton, now fairly launched, held up his hand. "Let me just finish what I got to say, sir," he said. "I put a few posers to you at the time I'm speaking of, and you didn't try to blink 'em like what Gosset did, 'oo's a very different pair of shoes. I've always remembered that about you, and then, o' course, her ladyship be'aving as she did, and everything being put right afterwards in a way as no one couldn't 'ave thought it could be put right—well, as man to man, it's made me think of you in a different way to what I done at first, before I knowed you for what you was, reely, and there's a kind of fellow-feeling, if you understand me. You're what you are, and I'm what I am, and if I'm presoomin', well, I 'aven't come as such. In what I believe in, a man's

a man whether he works with his 'ead or 'is 'ands, and there's occasions when it ain't out of place for a workman to show himself friendly to a gentleman, though, as a general rule, it comes about the other way."

The Rector's face, which had not been encouraging during the greater part of this speech, had cleared before its end. The man was what he was, rough, ignorant, and cocksure, but his good nature was as apparent as any of his qualities, and seemed to have directed him to an action that showed something deeper than mere good nature. Probably, a few weeks before, the Rector would have shown that such a visit as this was unwelcome to him, but he felt now that this man was actuated by a feeling of respect and something almost like affection for him, and was acting well, if somewhat awkwardly, in coming to him to show it.

"Well, Morton," he said, "the good-will of one man towards another is never out of place. It so happens that what touched you at the time you speak of has touched me. I never forgot it then, and it made me very careful how I spoke and acted. I can't talk to you about what happened years ago in my own life, or what is happening now; but as you have come to me in this way, I do feel inclined to say this to you: that I did better when I married your daughter to Gosset's son than when I stood out against the marriage at the time you speak of."

"Well, I don't know about that, sir," said Morton. "I think you acted very fair all through. Looking at it impartial, if your good lady hadn't made my girl a very different sort of girl to what she was before she come to her, it wouldn't have been no suitable marriage for young Percy. I saw that all the time, though I didn't let on to Gosset."

The Rector did not appear to have heard him; his eyes had been fixed on the ground. The thought was passing through his mind that here was an opportunity of showing

where he stood. The change in his point of view was definite and genuine, but his manner, his appearance, his habit of speech—all that he could not change, all that he was known by amongst the greater part of his parishioners—stood in his way. And his words stood—the words he had used at the time of the trouble with young Gosset and Morton's daughter, which had aroused criticism then, and would arouse much more, when remembered, now.

He looked up at Morton, and the colour on his cheeks was slightly heightened. "You spoke of helping me just now," he said. "You *have* helped me by coming here, as you say, as man to man." He smiled rather ruefully. "I am going through a difficult time, and sympathy from my neighbours is welcome to me. But sympathy is not of much use unless it is based on understanding. It wouldn't help me much now for a man to come and say to me: 'You did what you did thirty years ago, and thought it was hidden up for ever, and now it has come out, I'm very sorry for you. You didn't do anything very dreadful, after all, and what you are going through now is what might happen to any of us.' I know that that would be the view of the world, and it wasn't so very different from my own view a little time ago. It isn't my view now. If it were, then the only thing that would matter would be that I had been found out, and that can't be the right way of looking at things, Morton. If I hadn't come to see that what I did, and what the world looks lightly upon in a young man—what I looked upon too lightly myself before it came home to me—if I didn't think now that it was a deep sin, to be sorrowed over and repented of, and not to be excused, I couldn't go on here, as I mean to do. It would put me all wrong with the people I am trying to help to take the right way. Can you see that, I wonder?"

Morton saw something of it. His moon face was more

serious than its wont. "I think it's natural, sir," he said, "that you should think more seriously of it than others might—or ought to, as far as I can see. Part of the reason why I came here was this, that a lot of different stories are going about, as you might expect, and it's come home to me that you're at the mercy of the worst of them, not being able to defend yourself. I thought at first it might look like prying, but then I said to myself: 'No, if you can get at the rights of things and make use of 'em when lies is told, you'll be doing something as ought to be done. Whether you're the man to do it or not's another matter.'"

"Yes, I see," said the Rector thoughtfully. "Well, as I've told you, I'm not in the mood—and never shall be again—to make excuses. Still, what happened need not be made worse. I don't know what stories are going about, and I don't want to know. If you like to contradict them where they are untrue—I suppose that is what you mean—it was a kind thought—I'll tell you the facts of the case; you can do so on my authority."

He paused a moment. "You can say," he said slowly, "well, you can say exactly what *has* happened, to explain my telling you anything. I've no reason to be ashamed of it. You knew that stories were going about, and having a kindly feeling towards me, you came to me for the truth."

He told him, in bald words, the truth. Morton asked him a few questions.

"Well, it's about what I expected, sir," he said. "However you likes to look at it, I can't see that it was so very bad. It was a young man's mistake, and everything was done that could be done to put it right. It is hard lines that it come out after all these years, and has brought trouble on them as never need have knowed about it at all."

The Rector had nerved himself up to say something further. "And now you can do me another service," he

said, looking steadily at Morton. "Let my people know what I told you just now. I am going on living here, preaching to them, doing my work amongst them, because, looking at it as I do now, nothing has happened to unfit me for it. No man is free from sin, and no man has a right to minister to others in the Church on the grounds that he is better than they. If I have ever seemed to take that ground I have been wrong. It is out of my power to take it now, even if I wished to, because of what is known about me. I shall go in and out amongst them as one who has sinned as deeply as the worst among them; and, acknowledging it, I shall be fitter to serve them than I have ever been. Tell them, Morton, that I don't excuse myself for anything and don't ask them to excuse me. You'll do me better service in that way even than by contradicting what may be said about me that is false."

He stood up and held out his hand. Morton wrung it warmly. "I'll tell them you're a good man, sir," he said, "and we're all lucky to have you here."

Morton's advocacy did something to change the current of talk amongst those with whom he came in contact, and was carried so far as to cause him to attend one or two services at the church; but his pre-formed opinions, which he saw no reason for altering, deducted somewhat from the value of what was felt to be merely a complimentary appearance, and he came to the conclusion that he could better serve the man for whom he now entertained a warm respect, outside. What he did and said was perhaps of small value at the time. The talk had to run its course, he was not the best exponent of the attitude the Rector had taken up, which would come to be felt, not by explanation, but by a long course of action; and his circle was limited, although he was influential in it. Amongst the working people of Roding, opinion soon crystallised into the

feeling that a good deal of fuss was being made about a very ordinary matter. It provided food for talk, inasmuch as a common enough occurrence gained spice and interest through its connection with a state of society in which its bearings were different from the ordinary, and with the members of that society with whom the inhabitants of Roding were best acquainted, thus giving it a vivid human interest in addition. But as for inclination to censure—that was satisfied at a very early stage. The Rector was well enough liked by his humbler parishioners. He had always treated them “as a gentleman should,” and the discovery that he had an unexpected experience that brought him nearer to their level disposed them to like him rather better if anything. His family was more than liked, and the best feeling amongst these on the whole kindly uncensorious people was that they at any rate ought not to be made to suffer. Mrs. Stenning’s account of how Lady Ruth had confronted Miss Budd, pushed to terror at the idea of her children being harmed by her malice, made way. It appealed to every one. It was the touching human element in the tale. “Poor thing! Well, we shouldn’t like it, should we, if a spiteful cat like that was to let out tales about us to our children. Miss Sylvia didn’t *ought* to know nothing about it, nor Master Ronald neither, and anybody who lets it out to ’em ’ll be as bad as that there spiteful Miss Budd.”

This feeling was universally held. Sylvia and Ronald were given a more effusive welcome than ever when they paid their friendly visits, and not even the most mischievous of those who might otherwise have made experiments upon them, but held their tongues for fear of their neighbours.

You may always trust the poor, bound together by a thousand ties, moulded to kindness, courage, patience, loyalty, by common struggles in the battle of life, common

hopes and fears, common faults and common punishments, to take a sane view of any problem of morals, and to act upon it. You cannot so trust those who are a little way above them, or those of their own number in whom acquired opinions have taken the place of the broad instinct of right and wrong, who have a position to defend or a position to attack.

Thus Gosset, still bearing grudges, still, in spite of recent modification of such views, inclined to look upon an injury to the Church as an advantage to the chapel, professed pious horror at the iniquity that had come to light, but saw in it a blessing in disguise, inasmuch as the hearts of many might be expected to turn to a purer form of religion from one which could be marked by such scandal.

It was only to be expected that he should view the actual facts in the light of those in which he himself had been concerned, and the Rector, too. He thought he could see it all now. No wonder the Rector had taken up that line, at the first, of going against the idea of marriage! It would have been a bit *too* much, when he had committed exactly the same sin himself, and had given the girl the go-by, to say that in another case marriage ought to follow, though, no doubt, if it hadn't been for what he had done, that was the line he *would* have taken up; and he had pressed it afterwards.

Gosset was not remarkable for his powers of logic, but he was able to see that not much would be gained by attacking the Rector for taking up the same position as he had taken himself. It was true—to him—that his own objections had been founded on religious grounds, and the Rector's on worldly, and as it now turned out, personal grounds. But it was also true that the unsanctified outer world was too blind to see the difference. He was on firmer ground in having eventually consented to the mar-

riage, which the Rector had pressed upon him. Really, which ever way you looked at it, wasn't it a dreadful thing to think of, that a man who posed as a religious man—who set himself up on a pinnacle above his neighbours, who even took it upon himself to advise and rebuke those who had more religion in their little fingers than he had in the whole of his body—that such a man should be found out to be living a double life, to the great scandal of those who looked up to him for an example? Gosset shook his head solemnly, and imagined himself deeply distressed at the revelations that had come about. It behoved all men who cared for righteousness to take up a strong line when such iniquity as this was exposed.

But he was not quite clear as to the line which it behoved him, as one of those men, to take. Perhaps it would be best to consult Dr. Merrow about it before he took any.

CHAPTER XXX

FRIENDS

WHEN Sir Richard heard that the secret was everybody's, although he had expected it, he was profoundly disturbed; it seemed to him that life would be impossible for his brother in Roding. He would be driven out of it by the crooked Puritanism that winks at everything until it is found out, and then acts with malignity, which it mistakes for righteousness. It was in his mind to recommend flight. Let them go away until the storm had blown over. People would soon come to recognise what they had lost in them; their essential virtues would stand out, and this accidental revelation of something that had no essential bearing on those virtues would be taken at its true value. In six months or a year the most bigoted would be glad enough to have them back again, the trouble would be forgotten, and life could go on as before.

With these ideas, and added to them an uneasy feeling as to how Ruth would have taken the affair, and whether it might not make a permanent difference to his brother's married happiness, he came to the rectory to find them both in a state of mind that appeared almost untroubled. Deep trouble there was, but there was no fear in it, and no soreness. Nothing could happen that would be worse than what had already happened, and the feeling on the Rector's part that he had been hardly dealt with had departed, its place taken by a new humility of mind that gave him courage and serenity in face of the criticism and censure that would be directed on him.

"My dear girl," Sir Richard said, taking Lady Ruth's hand in his, when they had talked together for some time. "I might have known that you would put us all right. You have made me feel that there is nothing to worry about at all now. I knew it would have to be lived down, but I never thought it could be lived down without a long struggle, which I was preparing to face, while you kept out of it for a time. But if you're both going to stay here, as I see now you're right to do, I can go away with a clear conscience. It is time I had a little holiday, and I shall go to Finland next week, which I had meant to do a month ago."

They laughed at him. "We shall miss you dreadfully," said Lady Ruth. "You won't stay away for years this time?"

She knew that his deep-seated instinct for wandering must be satisfied, that it must have irked him to be tied, and that a determination to stay for long months in Roding, if they should have taken his first-proffered advice to leave it, would have been a difficult sacrifice of freedom on his part. She would not say a word to hold him, though the loss of his support and affection would be heavy at this time.

"I shall come back in the autumn," he said. "I simply must get away for a bit. I'm beginning to feel stifled. And I don't think I can do any good to you here. You're quite right to keep away from people for a time, but you couldn't keep away from my house, and if I don't ask people there it'll look odd. No use in *my* shutting myself up. No, I shall only be in your way here. I think I'll get off tomorrow."

Lady Ruth did not exactly shut herself up, and the Rector went about amongst his parishioners as usual. She went amongst them too, more often than before. She took up none of the work for which she had seemed to herself unfitted. What it came to was that she visited her poorer

neighbours instead of the richer. During the long years in which she had lived in Roding she had come to know many of them, and she had a way so sweet and simple of making friends that her rare visits had always been greatly thought of. Now, dropping into the little houses here and there for a chat, never refusing a cup of tea if it was offered to her, showing the most natural interest in the doings of these mostly hard-driven mothers of families, and taking them for a time out of their pre-occupations, she gained even more solace than she gave. They were so good to her, showed much delicacy in the way they ignored what they knew she must often be thinking of, treating her as an honoured guest, and at the same time as a woman with like sorrows and joys as themselves. There was not one of them, even the roughest, who did not treat her with tenderness, and hardly one of them showed that she looked to her for the sort of relief that a visit from such a one as she might be expected to bring.

This closing up of the ranks of womanhood around her, this loyal defence against injury threatened by the actions of men, from the daily menace of which few of these poor women were altogether free, was a revelation to her. She seemed to herself to have been living for years surrounded by a compact mass of women who unaccountably loved her, and to have foolishly passed them by for the sake of a few here and there who merely liked her. She reproached herself for her blindness, and felt that she deserved punishment for it, as well as for the sin of her husband, the weight of which she bore with him. But the punishment had turned to a new discovery of joy. It was as if she had broken open a great reservoir of goodness, the existence of which she had never imagined. Her heart expanded to it. These poor women often brought her near to tears, but they gave her a serenity and a happiness that she had thought she might never feel again.

There were not many sick in Roding at this time, but she went several times to see an old widow who lay bed-ridden in a two-roomed cottage in one of the courts that lay behind the High Street. One afternoon she was sitting by her bedside in the narrow upstairs room, so devoid of all the comforts that a woman ought to have had, who after a long and brave fight against adversity was waiting helpless for the end of it all. A bulging discoloured wall to look at, hung with a few Scripture texts, a strip of frayed carpet on a narrow uneven floor, the poorest necessities in the way of furniture, a patch of blue sky above a high wall through the bit of window—that was all that remained to her for an outlook on the world. Yet she was intensely thankful that her circumstances made it possible for her to keep it for as long as she lived. A niece, also a widow, lived with her, and there was enough to subsist on. She had company, and a mind free from that terror of the poor—no home to die in. Hardship was nothing; she had had that all her life. Her present state of quiescence was luxury compared with what she had gone through.

It was difficult to get her to accept anything. Lady Ruth before going upstairs had conspired with the niece to introduce some delicacies into her food, and had sent her up to the rectory on the plea, to the old woman, of taking an airing. They were alone together in the cottage.

A step was heard in the Court and a knock on the door below. Lady Ruth looked out of the window and saw Dr. Merrow standing by it. The old woman said she would like to see him, and she went down to let him in.

They had met, but had had hardly any words together. His face brightened when he saw her. "I know you come here often," he said. "She talks about hardly anybody else; you bring her great comfort, the dear soul."

Lady Ruth felt a little embarrassed. He carried a Bible

in his hand. If this was to be a pastoral visit, she would be in the way; but she had promised the old lady's niece to wait until she returned.

But Dr. Merrow said: "If you are talking to her she will not want me now. I can come to her later."

Lady Ruth told him that she wanted to see him, and he went up the narrow stairs after her, and into the little room, where there was hardly more than room for the two of them between the bed and the rest of the furniture.

The old woman wanted Dr. Merrow to read to her, and Lady Ruth to sit by her side and listen with her. She asked for the passage in which mention is made of the many mansions prepared in heaven for the faithful. Probably she connected Lady Ruth in her mind with those fair promises; one knows not what pictures presented themselves to her of dwelling-places, not dissimilar from those in which the gentry lived below, prepared above even for those like herself. She put out her old wrinkled hand and took Lady Ruth's in it. There was no envy in her mind of all that one more fortunate than herself had enjoyed; her own reward had only a little been delayed, and was soon coming; in the wisdom born of her long experience of life she knew that the equalities between them were greater than the differences; but it was nice to think that they would be closer together there.

When Dr. Merrow had finished reading he knelt down by the bed to pray. He did it quite naturally, and the simple words he used seemed to bring a fourth presence into the little room—one that was as well known to the poor woman lying there as either of her visitors—one that cared for her in the same way as they did, and would still be with her when she was out of their reach. He did not ignore the fact that she was dying. She was going home; it was not a fact to avoid, or in any way to deplore. He spoke to the Friend who would take her by the hand when

she crossed the threshold, and introduce her to the endless joys of her new home. And he prayed for those whom she would leave behind her, for a time, to whom the same hand was stretched out, if they were in any trouble. Lady Ruth knew that she was in his mind, and was drawn by his simple sincerity. He knew, and he sympathized, but in the light of his calm faith the trials of the world were no more to be feared than the passage from it, if a firm hold was kept upon the guiding Hand. Her emotional nature was brought near to tears, but she was consoled and inspirited.

The niece was heard to come in, and Lady Ruth went down to her. She did not say good-bye to Dr. Merrow, who came down in a few minutes when the niece went upstairs.

"You know what trouble I and my dear husband are going through," she said to him, without any preamble. "I know you are sorry for it. But there is nothing really to fear. Misunderstandings will be put right in time, and we must just go on until we come through it."

He had not seen the Rector since the truth had come out. He had thought of him with pity that had been all the deeper because of what he had seen of his character. It would go hard with him. He would be chafing sorely under the hurt to his pride; he would be downcast, and perhaps rebellious, at the blow dealt to his influence; he would be constantly angered at the false charges that were being brought against him, which he could not meet without further damage to pride and dignity.

But at these words of this gentle sweet-natured woman, whose truth and candour looked out of her eyes and made a profound impression upon him, a hope dawned that it was better than he had thought with the man who was being punished. With her beside him, the soreness would at least be lessened; courage would be directed into its right channel; a saving humility might take the place of hurt pride.

His eyes shone as he looked at her. "It is all so simple," he said, "if we keep firm hold of our faith. Nothing coming from outside can hurt us; it can only make us cling closer. There can be a deep calm of spirit under the roughest waves."

Her eyes dropped. "I think we are both coming to feel that," she said. "We have learnt many things together. We could not even say now that it would have been better if everything had been kept hidden."

As Dr. Merrow walked homewards his heart sang with joy. He was thrilled through and through with a sense of Divine power and love. What could they not do in the hearts of men, if they had worked such a miracle as this? His own faith had faltered before the thought of a complete surrender such as these dear people had made. Taken as they took it, the capricious stroke of vengeance was transformed into an act of Divine healing and acceptance. It set everything right. The sin itself, rankling under concealment, was plucked away at last. The years of work that had seemed at first to be destroyed by the brand of shame were purged of their imperfections; the good in them had been accepted, and had even led to this revelation, because the work had been such that nothing must be allowed to hinder it any longer, and it had strengthened the spirit to take hold of the difficult truth.

And the channel through which it was plain that the beneficent change had come! Dr. Merrow had thought of Lady Ruth indulgently, as a woman in whom natural goodness was stronger than the temptations of the world, with which she was rather too much mixed up. Now he saw her as an instrument chosen of God, because of her innate truth and purity, to work his loving will. She was one of those rare souls who had never resisted grace—one through whom grace could flow, without let or hindrance. It was an in-

spiration to come in contact with so pure a soul. It was a rebuke to all denials of the universality of Divine grace.

With these thoughts in his mind, Dr. Merrow reached his house and found Gosset awaiting him.

Gosset had been received by Mrs. Merrow, who liked him now better than she had thought possible at first. He was one of those who had succumbed markedly to her husband's influence—a sure path to her favour. He had behaved well about keeping Dr. Merrow unbothered by the business affairs of the chapel, when he had once understood what was required of him; and his appreciation of the services, which he looked forward to so eagerly, twice on Sundays and once on a week day, was as great as any of Dr. Merrow's numerous admirers had ever shown. And he had seemed to show himself much influenced by them. Mrs. Merrow had seen little of the ugly side of his character, but what she had seen seemed to have disappeared under the influence of her husband. He was a man whose mind was set on righteousness. If he had difficulties to contend with in himself, it made it all the more satisfactory, and him the more likeable, that he had been led to overcome them.

She wanted to hear what light he could throw on this disagreeable affair that had caused her such annoyance and her husband such distress. She had no direct means of hearing what was going on from day to day, but knew of Miss Budd's base attempt to fix the responsibility of her own offence upon them.

She delivered herself upon this subject to Gosset, who was as angry as she was about it. "It just shows," he said, "how little worth all that formal churchgoing is. It seems to me, Mrs. Merrow, that one's plain duty is to fight the Church and all that goes on in it. Whenever you feel inclined to think that some good comes out of it and leave

it to work, something happens to show that you've been napping. If there's one thing they do pride themselves on it is these weekly Communion services, and sometimes when I've seen people going to the church early in the morning I've thought there might be something in it—it wasn't all formality and superstition. But here's this woman, who I suppose never missed an early service for years, and she turns out really wicked, in a way you could hardly believe of anybody. No, I've done with it. I forget who it was said that the Church of England had damned more souls than it had saved, but I believe it's true. You can't pander to it; you haven't got a right to. You've got to do all you can to destroy it."

"Well, you can't say that because one person is found out behaving badly the religion she pretended to practise must be bad too," said Mrs. Merrow. "I don't believe in fighting the Church, except politically. What we have to do is to show a better way. People will come into it if we *can* show that it is better. They have come in here. The Doctor wouldn't want to arouse enmity. It wouldn't appear to him the right way."

"I know how charitable the Doctor is," said Gosset. "He sees good in everybody, and it's a great weapon of righteousness in his hands. Nothing's wanted but for him to go on preaching the truth in the beautiful way he does, and people will be drawn to listen to him. But it does seem to me, Mrs. Merrow, that the time has come for the rest of us to use other weapons, and to come out boldly and make a stand for the right—*show* where we stand, even when it means going against those in high places, which is a difficult thing to do in a town like this, and you're often tempted to shirk it. You said just now that because one person in a denomination is bad it doesn't follow that all the rest may be bad. But when you have the minister of

that denomination shown up, as Mr. French has been, living for years—for as long as he's been here, lording it over people, for as long as he's been in the ministry at all—the life we know now he *has* been living, I say that it's a great scandal and hindrance to religion, and it's our duty to show that we abhor such sins as he has committed, and won't have part or lot in them.”

“But Mr. French has done nothing since he has been here that—I mean, you say the ‘life he has been living.’ He certainly committed a grave fault many years ago, but there has been nothing since that you could take hold of.”

“I'm not so sure about that, Mrs. Merrow. A great many stories are going about which I don't know the truth of, and don't want to know, but it seems to be generally accepted anyhow that he went on paying money to this woman right up to the time of her death; and if you don't believe anything worse, it's difficult to believe that he didn't at least sometimes see her.”

“I can tell you the truth about that,” said Mrs. Merrow. “Money *was* paid, as I suppose it had to be; but it was all arranged at the time the son was born, and from that time to now Mr. French had no communications whatever with either him or his mother.”

“Oh!” said Gosset.

Mrs. Merrow threw a sharp look at him. “There is no need to make things out worse than they are,” she said. “Dr. Merrow heard part of the story, as you know, from the son himself, whom he had met before, and part from Sir Richard French. I am quite sure that he would say that anybody who heard things said that were *not* true ought to contradict them.”

“Oh, I shall do that, now I know,” said Gosset. “I am very glad to hear that the worst of what is being said is not true.”

He did not look it, and Mrs. Merrow said: "The Doctor feels, and I feel too, that it is hard on Mr. French, and particularly on Lady Ruth, that they are not in a position to contradict—well, lies—for themselves. It comes home to me, because, if that woman's lies about us had not been found out, quite by chance, we should have found it difficult to defend ourselves. It was Sir Richard French and Lady Ruth who set *us* right, and we must do what we can in return. But it would be wrong *not* to do it, in any case. I hope, Mr. Gosset, that you will do more than merely contradict false statements when you hear them—that you will make the truth known as far as you can."

"Oh, I will, Mrs. Merrow. After all, it's bad enough without that. In this instance, the Rector is proved to have been misunderstood, but are you quite sure now that there's been nothing else in his life but this one fault?"

"No, I'm not," said Mrs. Merrow shortly. "But as for any fault of the same sort, I am as sure as I can be under the circumstances that there has been nothing like it, and it would be a very wrong thing to encourage the belief, if that is what you mean."

"Well, I'll say no more about that, then," said Gosset, somewhat taken aback by her directness of speech. "There's talk, but I'll admit there's no proof, and until proof is forthcoming it would be wrong, as you say, to give credit to it. But when all that is said, what a scandal it is that a man—a man who holds the position that Mr. French does, a man who has held his head high, and professed to preach religion and rebuke wrong-doers, should have been found guilty of these years of deception, and to be no better than the worst of sinners! It's the hypocrisy that seems so hateful to me. If you'd heard him, Mrs. Merrow, when that poor boy of mine got into trouble! How shocked he was, and yet how he wouldn't hear at first of a marriage! Ah, there was

a lot behind that. People couldn't understand it at the time, but it comes home to them now. And afterwards, when he saw reason to come round, how he pressed for the marriage! No thought of how it might affect *me* in the position I hold in Roding! Yet there'd been no thought of marriage when *he'd* sinned in the same way! Quite different in *his* case, of course."

"Well, he seems to have acted according to his lights over that," said Mrs. Merrow. "I never quite understood why he should have been so much mixed up in it, but it has turned out happily, has it not? We ought not to let ourselves be prejudiced by——"

"Mixed up in it!" interrupted Gosset, delighted to have such support for his jealousies. "That's just the whole point, Mrs. Merrow. Nothing can happen here but what the Rector mixes himself up in it. It *had* nothing to do with him whatever. They'd been trying to get hold of my boy, and in the end they did get hold of him. Before Dr. Merrow came I was the chief man, if I may say so, in our denomination here, and as a tradesman I felt myself all the time having an unequal fight with the Rector, and thwarted time and again. I was always ready to stand up to him over any particular piece of aggression, but it was the whole weight of his position brought to bear day after day that made it so difficult for us to pursue our own way in peace. Now I feel that with a man like Dr. Merrow here at the head of us, we ought not to be satisfied to fill the second place. If you come to think of it, it's—well, it's grotesque that a man like Mr. French should be looked up to as the chief representative of religion in Roding."

Mrs. Merrow thought it was, too. She had fallen in with her husband's views, and had been content, with him, to see his congregation slowly increasing and consolidating, and the effect that he had worked upon it. She had been con-

tent, at least, not to hasten things, but it had none the less surprised her that after three or four months the Rector was still undoubtedly looked upon, as Gosset had said, as the "chief representative of religion in Roding." Gosset himself represented the high-water mark of social importance amongst his regular congregation, and not a single person from the larger houses in the neighbourhood had ever come to hear him preach, although some of them had called upon them. It made her hot with indignation that he should be ignored in this way, when she remembered the people of real eminence who had thought so much of him before, and the urgent calls he had had to minister to great churches, in America and elsewhere. He seemed to be dropping out. The daily mass of correspondence that had flowed in upon him, much of it from entire strangers, had dwindled to a narrow stream; his name was never mentioned in the papers.

She was glad that he should have a rest for a time. She knew that he was not really forgotten. If he published a book, or wrote a letter, it would be received with as much attention as before. And she had enough of his mantle upon her to be satisfied in the meantime with a small work in a small place, believing that no work of his could really be small, and finding him developing new powers of sympathy and understanding by the more intimate relations he had established with the congregation to which he ministered. But at the same time Gosset had used the right word when he had talked of it as grotesque that he should carry little more weight than the average pastor of a small chapel in a country town, not to be considered in any way the equal of a man of no more than second or third rate ability who happened to be rector of the parish. She was almost as much up in arms against the overwhelming prestige of the Church of England as Gosset himself. The proof of it had never come home to her before; she had never thought it

worth fighting. Now she thought that it would be cowardly not to make some definite stand against it.

As for the Rector, personally, the patronising air with which he had proclaimed his tolerance had always rankled. "You leave me alone and I'll leave you alone." She had not seen at the time what a very one-sided bargain that was. He had known perfectly well that he had nothing to fear from the advent into his parish of a nonconformist, however spiritually eminent, so long as he should refrain from definite attack. If the lists were to be set up he would suffer; he probably knew that too. Socially, of course, he would always be invulnerable to attack, which was another grievance, since social considerations seemed to carry such overwhelming weight in rural England. But, surely, it was time to prove that gentility and Christianity did not go hand in hand, however much they might appear to in such places as Roding.

She did think that he took a great deal too much upon himself, as Gosset had said. It was not an offence to allow one's self to be bitter about, but it was not unnatural that Gosset, with the instance he had mentioned of it fresh in his mind, should feel bitterly. She did not know, and Gosset had omitted to mention, the unanswerable reason for the Rector's having "mixed himself up" with the affair. She knew the end of it, which had been the drawing away of young Gosset from the religion in which he had been brought up, if not directly by the Rector, by the curate, acting under the full approval of the Rector. And it was true, to some extent, as Gosset had said, that with his record, he would have done much better to keep out of such an affair as much as possible.

"If it is a question," she said, "of making a more decided effort to attract people to the chapel, I think we must leave that for Dr. Merrow to decide. He is so much wiser

about these things than you or I, and he might not think that this was the time."

Gosset saw that she was partly with him, and felt a sensation of triumph. He had not time to reply to her before Dr. Merrow came into the room.

CHAPTER XXXI

GOSSET AGAIN

Mrs. MERROW saw by her husband's face that something had happened. He had often come to her with his face shining as it did now, but of late it had been more frequently shadowed. For the moment she regretted that Gosset was there to bring him back to what had been troubling him.

He greeted Gosset warmly. All the world was good to him now, and all its inhabitants.

"What good deed are you two conspiring together?" he asked, with a smile. "There is blessing to be poured down upon our dear people in Roding. God is with us here; we must open our hearts to his love."

It was the opening that Gosset wanted. It gave the spiritual touch to the campaign he had in his mind, and justified it. Mrs. Merrow would have given a good deal to have had him away, and made an attempt to get rid of him, but without much hope that it would be successful.

She rose from her chair. "Mr. Gosset and I have been considering something which we are not quite ready to tell you of yet," she said. "When we have talked it over again we will come to you."

Gosset looked bewildered for the moment at the invitation to departure, but did not accept it. "I think it ought to be settled now," he said. "It is the time to strike, and as Dr. Merrow says, the way seems to be shown to us."

Mrs. Merrow sat down again. The light was still on Dr. Merrow's face, but faded a little as he looked at her.

"I think we ought to have a mission," said Gosset. "It

would do a great deal of good at the present time, and increase our numbers, I hope, permanently. That's what I had in my mind to say to you, Mrs. Merrow, when the Doctor came in. We haven't had time to discuss details yet."

"I was saying that anything you thought of would have to be put before Dr. Merrow, who might not think this *was* the proper time," said Mrs. Merrow, concealing her annoyance as much as possible.

"Quite so," said Gosset. "But if Dr. Merrow thinks it over I believe he'll see with me that this is the opportunity. Religion has had a great blow dealt to it in Roding, Doctor. Things have happened which have caused a great deal of scandal to the more serious-minded amongst the church-people. They are like sheep wandering about without a shepherd. It seems to me a God-sent opportunity to put before them the Way of Life. Their hearts will be turned towards it, and it may result in such a revival of true religion in Roding as will turn this scandal to us into a real blessing."

He had put it better than Mrs. Merrow could have hoped for. But for the repetition of the word scandal she thought there was nothing in what he had said that would strike her husband unpleasantly, and if he took to the idea he would lift it out of the region in which Gosset's jealousies would have play.

But the light had now died out of Dr. Merrow's face. "I have sometimes thought," he said slowly, "that when I had felt my way here a little, a mission to those who do not use any means of grace provided for them might bring some of them in, and stimulate the spiritual life of those who do go to church and chapel. But I should not have done anything without first consulting the Rector, and this would not be the time to do that. I think my wife would

have said so if you had told her exactly what was in your mind."

He lifted his eyes to Mrs. Merrow's face, as if asking rather anxiously whether she was or was not with him in this. She made haste to say: "No, it would be out of the question at this particular time. We must think about it later."

Gosset felt himself unfairly deserted by her, and his feeling spurred him to press his suggestion. "I know how kind you are towards people, Doctor," he said. "You wouldn't want to do anything that would look like rubbing in what's happened, if I may use the expression. But I'm not thinking of anything of that sort. It seems to me that we've got a duty laid on us that over-rides all that. If it's possible for church and chapel to work together, I say by all means do it. But you've been here now for nearly four months, and what invitation has been held out to you to join hands? None whatever. The most you can say is they've let us alone: Well, they haven't even done that when it suited them. If Mr. French didn't get my son away from us, Mr. Barton did. It seems to me that there's a point where giving into them becomes weakness. If Mr. French wanted to do anything in connection with the Church, he wouldn't think of consulting you first, though you are a preacher known all over the world, and he's just an ordinary country clergyman."

"When I spoke of consulting Mr. French," said Dr. Merrow, "I did not mean at all in the way of asking his permission to do anything that I thought it right to do. I meant that I should have liked his co-operation. But if he did not see fit to give it, or even if he were likely to object for any reason, it would not deter me."

"Four months is not a very long time to feel one's way in," said Mrs. Merrow. "The conditions here are different

from anything that Dr. Merrow has worked under before, and I think he feels that he does best for the present to get to know his own people intimately, and not to take the lead in any new departure."

The phrase set Gosset off. "To take the lead," he said, with some excitement, "is just what I think it's plainly pointed out now that Dr. Merrow should do, and do at once, with a strong hand. I shan't be saying too much if I say that it seems to me that you have been guided here, sir, for that very purpose. Let alone that we believe that we preach the pure Gospel truth, and the Church has overlaid it with a lot of superstition; religion has been betrayed here in the Church. Mr. French has proved himself unfit to lead. His own people are turning from him, and quite rightly, for they can stand a lot, but they won't stand the sort of thing he's been guilty of. They will listen to you, when perhaps they wouldn't listen to anybody else in the same position. If you make a bold bid for souls now, Dr. Merrow, you will get them in Roding, which will be a very different place to what it's ever been before."

Dr. Merrow's face was now overcast, but he did not yet seem to grasp exactly what Gosset was inviting him to. Mrs. Merrow did, but she could do nothing now to stop him.

"I think you speak too harshly of Mr. French," he said. "But putting that aside for the moment, what is it exactly that you want me to do? If I thought that the time had come to hold a mission, it would not be for the purpose of drawing people away from the Church. I have never tried to do that. It would be proselytising pure and simple, and we have enough enlightenment in these days to be sure that we lose more than we gain by doing that. What is it you want me to do, Mr. Gosset?"

Gosset leaned forward, and spoke eagerly. "Look here,

sir," he said. "What chance have the people of Roding had of hearing the truth preached to them? What guidance have they had? Here's a man—been here over twenty years—and at the end of it found out to be a man who's led such a life that he ought not to be where he is at all. I don't say that he's led a bad life *since* he's been in the Church, though many people do. I don't know; it's enough for me that he did what we know he did. And if you look back on his life here, it's all of a piece with that. Pure worldliness from beginning to end. He's lived here as a fine gentleman, and his wife as a fine lady—very nice to people and all that, but in the *way* of a fine lady, and no more sense of religion or what it means than if she hadn't been a clergyman's wife at all. We ought not to leave the place to the guidance of people like that. They're not fit for it, neither of them. They're seen for what they are now, and it's time their authority was taken away from them, and put into the hands of others."

Probably Gosset's dragging in of Lady Ruth was intended as a sop to Mrs. Merrow, who might be expected to welcome the idea of taking her place; though how that was to be brought about was not made plain. He had not thought of her in connection with his proposals hitherto, and it was unfortunate for him that he had done so now.

Dr. Merrow's face was set in a deep frown. It cleared as he looked away from Gosset and said to his wife in a quiet voice: "I went to see a dying woman this afternoon. I found Lady Ruth with her, as she has been with her many times lately. We read the Word together and prayed together. I prayed for guidance and comfort for all those who were in trouble, and my prayer was answered. It had been answered before I made it. Trouble—and shame that must have been very hard for her to bear—had overtaken this dear lady, and they had brought her so close to God

in his infinite love and compassion, that I was confounded for my own lack of faith as I talked to her. She had brought strength and healing to her husband, who has sinned, as David sinned, and has repented before God, as David did. God has cast him down and lifted him up again. Where he walked in pride, he now walks in deep humility, but in strong faith. They tread their path together." He turned so sharply to Gosset as to cause him to start. "Are *these* the people that I am to seek to dispossess?" he asked, in a louder voice. "At the very time that it is made plain to me that God has taken the burden of this man's sin from off him and given him new strength and new light, am I, who have never been tempted as he has, and never been forgiven as he has, to bind the burden on him again? Am I to set myself up as better than he, with God's favour so abundantly shown to him, and set myself to draw away from him the people who can learn from him now as they have never learnt before? It is a base thought. It offends me deeply."

Dr. Merrow had not hitherto made personal acquaintance with the truculent side of Gosset's character. He had a taste of it now. Gosset had begun by feeling rather ashamed of himself. It was foolish to have brought in Lady Ruth; she had never been in his way, and if he had had time lately to think of her in connection with the scandal at all, he would have felt sorry for her. He was even touched by Dr. Merrow's reference to her. But to talk about the Rector in the same way!—it was a caricature of charity. He felt annoyed that Dr. Merrow should have allowed himself to be hoodwinked. And he felt the ground slipping from beneath him, and was the more annoyed. But when Dr. Merrow turned to address him, and did so with increasing indignation, he began to set his back up; and when the address ended on a note of censure, he became much the same

Gosset as the Rector had had experience of, and had sketched out for Dr. Merrow's benefit.

"I don't think it's fair to speak to me in that way, Dr. Merrow," he said, angrily. "What I said about Lady Ruth I don't hold to. It was a slip, and I've nothing against her. But if you think that Mr. French has turned into anything like what you say, then you've been imposed upon. A leopard can't change his spots. I've known Mr. French all my life and I say the picture you draw of him is simply ludicrous."

Dr. Merrow's eyes flashed. "Do you mean to say that God cannot change a man's heart?" he asked.

"I mean," said Gosset, "that a man like Mr. French wouldn't think his heart needed changing. He's simply eaten up with pride and self-importance. Repent, yes; I dare say he has repented. He's been found out, and wishes he hadn't been. That's as far as his repentance will ever carry *him*. I tell you, Dr. Merrow, that you're making a great mistake in treating this business in the way you do, and you'll find it out by-and-by, when it will be too late. You'll find that Mr. French is exactly the same as he's always been, when once this scandal is allowed to blow over; and then the chance will be gone."

"The chance for what, Mr. Gosset?"

"Why, the chance for taking the position in Roding that it's your duty to take, for the sake of the cause. Think what you like about Mr. French. Whether he's a changed man or not, he'll have to keep quiet for some time to come. You can have your own way now as you can never expect to have it again."

It was Mrs. Merrow who spoke, rising from her chair. "I think you had better go away, Mr. Gosset," she said. "You are forgetting yourself altogether. It is not becoming in you to speak to Dr. Merrow in that way, or to me."

It was the voice of the "good customer," which always had power to dissipate the fumes in Gosset's brain. But before it could have its effect Dr. Merrow had begun to speak.

"I think if I were to hold a mission in Roding," he said quietly, "the first person I should hope to bring to submission and repentance would be you. You need it, my friend. The devil is very busy in your heart just now."

Mrs. Merrow went out of the room. Gosset looked simply bewildered.

"You think you are actuated by zeal for God's service," Dr. Merrow went on, speaking slowly, almost reflectively. "The devil often dresses up hatred and malice to look like zeal. But he generally dresses them up rather more cleverly. Why, man! a child would not be taken in by such a disguise. A child, I say! A child would shrink from you, possessed as you are."

Gosset stared at him, held by his eyes, which had no anger in them now, nor even rebuke, but seemed to pierce right down to the welter of ugly thoughts surging through his mind.

"I have seen God's grace working this afternoon, as plainly as if he had drawn aside the curtain of my flesh and shown me some of his unimaginable glory. I have talked with a woman who is going through the shadow of death and is not afraid. I have talked with another woman who has passed through a shadow that must have been as deep, and she is not afraid. Do you think I do not know what upholds them? Do you think I have made a mistake about *them*?"

Gosset's eyes dropped, and he found his voice. The truculence had gone out of it as he said: "I know I was wrong to say what I did about Lady Ruth. I said I was wrong."

Dr. Merrow went on in the same low voice. "She has come through her shadow; it has turned into light. She has brought her husband with her; they are walking in the light together. Nothing that wicked tongues can say against them can harm them. What do you think she said to me—that good woman whom God has used—about her husband? 'We have learnt many things together. We could not even say now that it would be better if everything had been kept hidden.' That is how they have been brought to see it. Or do you think *she* has made a mistake?"

"I'm sure if he thinks about it like that he *is* changed."

"Yes, he thinks about it like that. It is not possible that she could have made a mistake. Her words gave me the purest joy. I came home singing praises to God in my heart for revealing to me these signs of his love. It seemed to change all the world around me. I thought that Satan and all his powers of evil had been routed for a time, and that was why all the beautiful country smiled as it had never smiled on me before. And I come into my own house and find him waiting here for me, strongly entrenched in the heart of one of my friends."

"What is it you complain of, Doctor? Why do you say such things to me?" Gosset's tone was expostulatory, almost tearful.

The quiet voice went on. "The longer I live, and the more I believe that the Church to which I belong gives me the most freedom and opportunity to preach the truth as I have learnt it, the more I believe that God's grace ranges everywhere, and is confined to no one Church, nor even to the whole body of them. For once that a pure impulse leads a man of one Church to attack another, the devil uses the weapon a thousand times. Don't let him use you. You have learnt so much better. You love the truth of Christ's gospel; keep it shining in your heart. Show yourself tender

and compassionate; don't set yourself up as an obstacle to the working of God's Holy Spirit. It can only plunge you in darkness and strife."

"Oh, but I wouldn't do that. You must know I wouldn't. I have been mistaken. I never thought it possible that a man like Mr. French could change his whole nature, as he must have done, if what you say is true."

"Then rejoice with me that what you have thought impossible God has brought about; and go home and set yourself to make his path more easy to tread. It must be a hard one. A lesson learnt by a sudden illumination needs daily effort to be acted upon. The light seems to fade, the pull of old desires comes back, the world remains suspicious and critical."

"But what can I do to help? I can't go to Mr. French and talk to him."

"Why should you? You can go to others and talk to them. You say plainly that there is a feeling against him, and you have shown as plainly that you have been glad of it and hoped to use it for your own ends."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that. You have shown me how wrong it is, and where it comes from. But the feeling is against the sin he committed."

"Is it? I don't think so. And if it were, should it be directed against the sinner? Would you welcome such a feeling against your own son, who sinned in the same way?"

"He put it right as far as he could, humanly speaking."

"Humanly speaking—if you mean that marriage followed his fall, there is no possibility of that in this case. Let people say, if they will, that because that was not done, the sin was the worse; but don't let them say that it has put that sin, or could put any sin, beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. And don't let them dwell on the sin, or befoul their minds by searching for other causes of offence, which

many—you amongst them—have wished to find. There is great wickedness in that—to spread a net to entangle the feet of one who is striving to rise above himself. It is hindering God's work as surely as if you were tempting him yourself. You *are* tempting him. He can hardly avoid bitterness of feeling when spiteful tongues are accusing him wrongfully; and bitterness is a great hindrance. Your duty is very plain, my friend, and it ought to be your joy. Blessed are the peacemakers. That was never more true than it is here."

Gosset was conquered. Half an hour later he left the house determined to use what influence he had to stop the talk, and to give the Rector a chance of reinstating himself. Mixed up with the spiritual comfort he had found once again in following Dr. Merrow's lead, was the thought that the nonconformists of Roding could attract great credit to themselves by refusing to take advantage of the scandal to the Church, and could set a beautiful example of Christian behaviour to an enemy who had laid himself open to attack.

CHAPTER XXXII

AT THE RECTORY

RALPH FRENCH and Charles Merrow had become friends. There is as much instinct in a mutual attraction of two men as in that of a man and woman, although the sexual factor is absent. Manner and appearance have as much to do with it in the first stages in the one case as in the other, but the roads then diverge. If the first liking of two men for one another is to ripen into friendship, there must be community of tastes, and probably some dissimilarity of character, so that the one may admire and depend upon something in the other in which he is lacking himself.

These conditions were fulfilled in the case of these young men. Their tastes were very similar, and their immediate aims in life were the same. It made no difference to their friendship that they were in opposite political camps, because neither of them took his politics with bitterness, and they were at that age when it does not seem so unreasonable that men on either side should work for a common end. They were interested in the same social subjects, and the differences between them were only such as made their discussions the more interesting.

Ralph admired Charles's imperturbable optimism, and the light play of his mind, which carried with it so much wisdom, and stimulated his own more slowly moving ideas.

Charles's feeling for Ralph was of a more mixed quality. Probably he was drawn to him at the first by his relationship to Sylvia, and the part he played in the family life of the rectory, which Charles found so attractive that there

was a glamour over everything and everybody connected with it. But the liking soon broadened into something more solid. What he admired in Ralph were his rigid honesty of mind, and the tenacity with which he clung to his ideas. This tenacity applied also to his opinions, but it fascinated Charles to see these two qualities occasionally at issue, and the finer of them always winning. Ralph would fight hard against a new idea that did not happen to suit with the rest of his ideas, but if it carried any weight he would work it out for himself, and, if he came to accept it, it became part of his mental equipment for all time. Rigidity, thus tempered by reason, seemed to Charles, with his more supple mind, a very fine quality indeed. It was something to depend upon, and made their frequent arguments more equal than they would otherwise have been. Each could affect the other, Charles by gradually solving Ralph's prejudices with his nimble attack, Ralph by opposing a firm belief to conclusions too easily arrived at. In the matter of brains there was not much to choose between them. Charles was quicker, Ralph more solid. Their similarities and dissimilarities brought them together equally. They bid fair to be friends for life.

When the tongue of rumour first began to wag in Roding they had arrived at that degree of intimacy that there was no difficulty in mention of it between them. Of what had brought it on they did not speak. Ralph had been cast down by what his father had told him, and knew that he had his friend's sympathy.

They were walking up and down the broad path by the river. Ralph said: "You know what everybody in Roding is talking about. It makes things very difficult."

"It's a nine days' wonder," said Charles. "The talk will die down."

"There are people who won't let it die down if they can

help it. Of course it's the religious people who are the worst, beginning with that beast of a woman who brought it all on."

"Was she a religious woman? I suppose she called herself one. My father is a religious man; he's not like that."

Ralph threw a quick look at him. "Your father must have a great influence here," he said. "If this had happened six months ago, do you know who would have been the sharpest thorn in our sides? Mr. Gosset. There's no doubt of it; and after what happened with him, and the line my father took over it, he would have spread himself for all he was worth, and aroused a great deal of feeling. But he met my father in the street yesterday, and said he wanted to shake hands with him. He said: 'You're going through a bad time, Mr. French; but you've got more friends in Roding than you know of. This will show what some of them are made of.' I call that quite extraordinary, for Gosset. I always thought him a most detestable creature, and sure to take the wrong line if he possibly could. But he seems to have turned into quite a different person altogether."

Charles had no love for Gosset, who had tactlessly and rather patronisingly treated him as an "earnest young man" of a pattern which he particularly disliked, because he loyally attended his father's services. He saw no reason why Dr. Merrow's direct responsibility for Gosset's change of front should be hidden.

"My father talked to him," he said. "My mother told me about it. Gosset came to him a day or two ago full of high-minded malice. He was told quietly and affectionately that he was possessed of a devil, at which point my mother left the room, knowing that the affair would march. When Mr. Gosset departed the devil seemed to have left him, and

I should think he would go on behaving himself quite respectably."

He laughed suddenly. "Really, there's nobody like my father," he said. "I would have given anything to hear what he said to that gentleman. I bet he didn't spare his blushes. Fancy beginning like that, and sending him away ashamed of himself! If you or I had said it there'd have been a free fight."

"Especially with Gosset," said Ralph. "Well, I think we ought to be very grateful to your father; and we are. If he can keep his people in hand like that, ours will settle down by-and-by. The only real danger is of Sylvia and Ronald hearing something."

Charles flushed. "I can't think that anybody would have the indecency to say anything to them," he said.

"Ronald goes about everywhere and noses into everything. He knows already that there's something."

"Has he said anything?"

"My mother told him that she and my father were troubled about something that she didn't want to tell him and Sylvia of. She wants us to give him a lot to think about and plenty to do, so that he won't feel there's a shadow over us, so to speak."

"Well, then let's make it our business to do that. Let's give young Ronald the time of his life, and incidentally keep him from going about too much. There is some danger, with an enquiring mind such as that young gentleman has."

The result of this conversation was that activities in the way of games, and pleasure generally, were pursued by the younger members of the rectory family with great ardour through the remainder of the summer holidays, Charles helping to the limit of his ability, and gaining at least as much satisfaction as anybody else. Myra Curtis was an-

other lieutenant. She knew; and Lady Ruth had talked to her. George Barton was away during this time. He was to sail in October, and had arrangements to make and relations to visit.

Ralph felt rather sad about George. He had been his chief friend, and was passing out of his life, and he did not feel it as much as he had thought he would.

George had changed during the last year. Ralph knew that the change was towards a much more complete surrender to the vows he had taken upon himself. It had come about without the least disturbing jar; he talked about himself as little as ever, and no atom of spiritual pride was apparent in him; he was the same simple-minded, affectionate fellow that he had always been. Ralph's own affection for him was deeper than before; he felt a pang whenever he thought of losing him. But it was not because he would greatly miss his companionship. He had moved away; he stood upon a plane where Ralph could not follow him. Their basic interests in life, which had been the same for many years, had diverged. There is a tacit reproach in one whose life is ordered naturally on a deeply spiritual basis. The world may come to reverence a saint, but it does not live at ease with him.

There was a good deal going on in the houses around Roding at this time of the year, and the rectory had always played its part with the rest. But this year there was no entertaining of neighbours, and neither Lady Ruth nor the Rector went anywhere. People came sometimes to see them, some of them at first out of curiosity, later on more intimate friends out of sympathy.

Lady Ruth would have been right in her instinct to keep aloof for a time, if it had rested on nothing more than expediency. She had always been very much liked by her neighbours, and when she consistently refused invitations,

and gave none where she had given so many, they began to ask themselves why she should want to shut herself up. *She* had done nothing to be ashamed of; surely she could not think that this rather absurd affair would make any difference! Perhaps she was sensitive about the talk that she must know would be going about, but—well, her husband's name had certainly been made pretty free with. If she, or he, could have heard all that had been said about him! Still, everybody was in the same box. One talked about one's dearest friends, if they gave occasion for it, in a way one wouldn't want them to hear. One meant no unkindness by it, and one didn't go on talking for ever.

Some compunction began to be felt. The story had had its run; what was there in it, after all? Surely nothing to make any one behave differently to such nice people as the Frenches! Henry French was a parson, and fair game for a little amusement; but it would be absurd to carry it too far. He wasn't only a parson; he was one of themselves, and if he was having a bad time with his ungrateful parishioners, of which there were rumours, they ought to show him that he was still as welcome as ever amongst those to whom he belonged. It was really too bad of the old bishop to behave as he had done about the archdeaconry. The man was to be pitied, not condemned; and as for dear Ruth French, it was hard on her that she should be mixed up with all these narrow-minded church notions at all.

So invitations came in more copiously than ever, but were refused for some time longer. Interest in the tale died down, and its place was taken by something like dismay at the idea of Roding Rectory continuing to hold aloof, for no reason whatever.


But the young people from the rectory were to be seen about—not so much as before, because Sylvia did not care about going out without her mother, and Ralph and Ronald

eschewed such entertainments as garden-parties and flower-shows. But there was cricket sometimes, and lawn-tennis frequently, and whenever any of the three of them put in an appearance they were received with more than usual warmth of welcome. Ronald expanded voluminously under this treatment. No schoolboy in the whole of England enjoyed those summer holidays more than he did.

The weather was persistently fine. They were out of doors all day long. They went for long excursions on the river, picnicking in places which they had never reached before, bathing in shady backwaters so mysterious and so undisturbed that they seemed to be the haunts of the great god Pan himself. They came back singing, trailing their fingers in the cool water, which the setting sun turned into a lane of polished gold. The bonds of the dinner-hour were relaxed for them. There was supper at whatever hour they liked to return, and after it they would go out into the garden, and walk up and down under the moon, or play the thrilling game of "ghosts" in the darkness.

Ronald had a school friend staying with him. The party for excursions was generally made up of the six of them, who paired off, when pairing was done. Ralph with Myra, Ronald with his friend, Charles with Sylvia.

Charles soon gave up all pretence with himself. He never asked himself whether he might have resisted, and how he could not have resisted if he had wished to. He would walk home to "The Limes," under the stars, his whole being flooded with happiness. He never asked himself how it would all end, nor took account of difficulties in the way. He lived wholly in the present. He would lie awake in the night and go over in his mind the things that she had said to him, and the way she had looked, seeking for those infinitesimal signs on which a lover builds such towering structures, that might show that she knew, that



she cared. He would fall asleep again full of joy at the thought of another day soon to dawn in which he would be with her.

He was with her nearly every day. His assistance in keeping Ronald busy and happy was given ungrudgingly. Ralph treated him as the most intimate of friends, and had no idea that he was in love with Sylvia. If Lady Ruth had any such idea she kept silence.

Dr. and Mrs. Merrow dined one evening at the rectory. It was the first time Dr. Merrow and the Rector had met since the disclosures. The Rector had come in late and while he was dressing they went upstairs to see Joyce and Eddie. Lady Ruth was a little nervous over the occasion, and wanted to oil the wheels of intercourse. Only intimate friends were taken to see the children in this way.

Dr. Merrow loved little children, almost to adoration. He sat on Joyce's bed and told her a story, while the rest were entertained by Eddie. It was a good story, and Joyce listened to it with breathless interest, keeping her dark eyes fixed upon his face all the time.

When he had finished she said: "Thank you very much. I hope you will often come and tell me stories. I think you are rather like George. I suppose you know that George is going away. I cried about it when he first told me."

"Who is George?" asked Dr. Merrow. "I am sorry he is going away."

"George is our cousin. I love him very much and shall miss him awfully."

The others came in, and they went downstairs, without Dr. Merrow learning who George was.

The experiences he had gone and was going through had made their mark on the Rector. His healthy rubicund face was lined, and his manner had lost something of its

self-assurance. He played his part, but it was an effort to him. The party at the dinner-table was large enough to make it necessary that he should talk for a time to Mrs. Merrow, who sat on his right, and although he did his best, and she did her best, there was no ease in their conversation.

But the high spirits of the younger people, who had by this time banded themselves together by innumerable ties of understanding and humour, soon made way, and the elders were relieved of the lead. Dr. Merrow found them fascinating, severally and generally, especially Ronald, with whom he interchanged railleries, and Sylvia, who sat next to him, and whom he thought worthy to be the daughter of such a mother. She and Myra agreed afterwards that he was a "genuine lamb," which was their highest form of praise.

Charles was a little anxious lest the men should be carried into the Rector's study after dinner. He liked talking to the Rector, but liked better still joining the rest in the drawing-room or on the terrace. But after they had smoked a cigarette over the dinner-table, the Rector took Dr. Merrow into his study and Ralph took Charles's arm and led him off in the direction in which he wished to go. "Let our respective parents have a talk together," he said. Charles desired nothing better.

Lady Ruth and Mrs. Merrow had established relations. The older woman was touched by the courage and sweetness of the younger. She knew that this occasion must be something of an ordeal for her. It was the first time guests—except the young people—had been asked to the rectory since the disturbance had come about, and she and her husband, who had been mixed up in it, would not be the easiest of guests to entertain and keep up conversation with. At least, she herself would not.

But there had been no effort to simulate an unnatural liveliness. Lady Ruth had seemed glad that the lead in the talk and laughter should have been taken by the young people, and had been quiet herself, though she had smiled constantly, and laughed sometimes. Mrs. Merrow had been touched by the way her sons and daughter treated her, constantly turning to her in their confidential pleasantries, as if she were one with them, but to be treated with peculiar tenderness and affection. Evidently they adored her; and the youthfulness in her, which Mrs. Merrow had found uncongenial on a first acquaintance, had been a great tie between them. That air of youthfulness had disappeared. She was as pretty and graceful as ever, but she was more like the mother who loves to see her children enjoying themselves than the young mother who enjoys herself with them. They felt the change and were wooing her back to her light-heartedness.

Mrs. Merrow had found it difficult to believe in everything that her husband had seen in Lady Ruth. She had not struck her as having such possibilities in her. But now she accepted it all, and felt compunction at having misjudged her. She was a generous woman, and felt maternally inclined towards one whom she had seen so gay, who had suffered—who had it in her to suffer so much—from the blow that had changed her gaiety to this gentle serenity. She saw the side of it that few would be thinking about at this time—the woman's side, which had nothing to do with the hazard of publicity. She would have suffered as much if none but she had known. When this came to Mrs. Merrow's mind, sympathetically observing her hostess across the dinner-table with the sharp eyes that never seemed to rest on her, she cast a look at the Rector, trying to gauge how these two now stood towards one another, who on the surface were the wealthy fortunate parents of a happy united

family. She surprised a look across the table which made her understand a little more of what lay beneath it all. This man, who had seemed so encased in self-approbation that even disgrace could hardly be expected to pierce through the shell, had suffered too, and not only because of the disgrace. Her husband had judged him aright, as well as his wife. Whatever he might appear to the world—and it was not to be supposed that he would go about displaying his white sheet—he was changed. The two of them, as Dr. Merrow had said, were treading their path together.

The two women talked together in the drawing-room before Ralph and Charles came in. Sylvia and Myra, and Ronald and his friend, were outside on the terrace. No mention was made of what was chiefly in the minds of both of them, but Lady Ruth felt as if those uncomfortable prickles with which Mrs. Merrow's social skin had seemed to bristle were withdrawn for ever. They could always meet as friends henceforward, with an unexpressed bond of sympathy between them.

The two young men came in, and after a few words went outside. The two women talked about their sons. By-and-by they all came in and grouped themselves round the piano, and after that there was no more quiet talk.

Mrs. Merrow's eyes were opened, not only towards her host and hostess, that evening. Charles had said nothing to her; but she saw.

She saw him, her own son, with new eyes. She had to take them, so as to judge how these people, who were of a different environment from hers, would be likely to see him. The dislike she had felt towards any sort of complication that would make apparent a difference of social grade, which she had no wish to overstep, was still at the back of her mind, but it could not but be lessened by the new feelings

that she experienced towards them. It resolved itself into enquiry how far the difference was apparent in him.

The enquiry was a little anxious, because with her sharply critical attention fixed upon Sylvia, as much as upon Lady Ruth, she had seen in her a rare prize that any mother might covet for her son. Her beauty and charm attracted her strongly, and she saw them to be based upon the same qualities as those of her mother. She was a girl who had been much in the world and had been untouched by it. Her very gaiety was based upon innocence and purity.

But in externals—in her clothes, in the turn of her speech, and in other little things—she was marked as of her class, the class that looks to mating within itself. Its ideas might not have affected her yet—the sharp eyes looked for signs, and could not find them—but they would be those of her parents. Indeed Mrs. Merrow had heard, indirectly, that there was a match in the making—a very desirable match, judged by those standards, and one that would be everywhere considered suitable for such a girl as this. How would her own son be regarded, if it came to a question of rivalry?

She thought that he was a prize, too, in everything that really mattered. He had a man's strength and cleanness to match with the girl's purity, and a tenderness that would reverence and cherish her dependence upon him. He would have the power to make the woman he loved very happy. If there were none of these tiresome distinctions of caste to be taken into account, if the girl had been, as to her place in the world, just what that other nice girl, her chosen friend, was, it would have been like to like; and indeed here, where caste was sunk, in an altogether admirable acceptance of other standards, there was no sense of inequality. He had been received into the most friendly intimacy by the whole charming family. Lady Ruth had spoken of him in a way

to warm his mother's heart towards her still further. They not only liked him, but admired him.

But how far would that liking and admiration carry them? What had he besides, that they would expect in a husband for their daughter?

His mother thought that he would certainly distinguish himself in the world. His father had done so, but as it happened just in the one way in which distinction would not count with these people. If they could look a few years ahead they ought to be able to see Charles filling a place in the world which would make him a son-in-law to be proud of.

As for his manners and appearance! She had never given the matter much thought. That he had acquired a more attractive and assured address than the young men amongst whom she had been brought up she had taken for granted, as coming partly from the qualities he had inherited from his father, partly from the education he had been given. She now wanted to see whether they were such as would satisfy those who set up a code in such matters.

She compared him with Ralph. He was not nearly so good-looking, but otherwise she thought nobody could have told which of them had sprung from the middle classes, which from the upper; and that, to put it crudely, was what it came to. He had the same clear spare look of muscular youth, the same unconscious ease of manner. She thought he was a very proper man, from every point of view.

At the same time, she wished very much that Lady Ruth had not been Lady Ruth, and that the Rector of Roding had been nothing more than the Rector of Roding.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MRS. MERROW AND CHARLES

MRS. MERROW and Charles talked together that night. Dr. Merrow had gone up to his study. His health had so much improved that he had taken with delight to an old habit that he had had to relinquish for some time, of reading sometimes far into the night.

Charles had been silent as they had walked home together, but it must have done his heart good to hear his father's warm praises of the rectory family in general, and of Sylvia in particular.

They were sitting at a corner of the dining-room table, on which refreshments were laid. Charles, who had been in a reverie, looked up to see his mother's eyes fixed upon him, with a look which he could not mistake. His own eyes dropped for a moment, and then he smiled at her and said: "Well, mother, I see you know my secret."

"My dear boy," she said, "she is one of the sweetest girls I have ever seen. But you mustn't set your heart too much on her, till you know. I can't tell what difficulties may be in the way, but I am sure there will be some."

"Till I know!" he repeated. "How can I know? And how can I help setting my heart on her."

"I have heard—something——"

"You mean about Pangbourne. Ralph told me he wanted to marry her. I don't believe she cares for him a bit. She has never even mentioned him."

She smiled inwardly at this, but took up another point.

"If he told you that," she said, "in what way did he tell you? It might have been as a warning."

"Oh, no! I have been very careful. I've no right to be anything else. He has no idea that I love her. Ah, I do, mother. You can't wonder at it, can you?"

She felt as if he were a little boy again, coming to her with his secrets.

"How do you mean," she asked, "that you have no right to be anything but careful?"

"Well, what am I? I've done nothing yet—nothing that counts. And I don't know how they'd look at it. They treat me as one of themselves. I've no right to make love to her—in the way they've taken me in. I don't. But I suppose I can't keep it from showing. Sometimes I think she cares, sometimes I think she doesn't. If I knew she did, I should go ahead. I don't think I can keep it to myself much longer."

The contradictions made him seem to her very young again—her Charles, who in some ways was so much older than his years.

"I think we ought to talk it over," she said. "These things don't stand still. Under all the circumstances, you ought to consider whether it wouldn't be right to speak to her parents before you speak to her. I mean, not to let yourself be driven entirely by your feelings, which may overcome you any moment, you know, dear boy."

She smiled at him, and he smiled back. He had overcome his momentary weakness of will, and was ready to face the situation with her on its less agreeable side.

"No, I ought not to do that," he said. "But it's precious hard. The question is, What chance have I with them? It's only quite lately I've thought of it at all. They're all so kind, Lady Ruth and the Rector, as well as the young ones, that it's rather terrible to run the chance

of throwing a bomb at their heads. It would be beastly if I were to find out that they thought I shouldn't do at all. I really don't know in the least how they'd take it. And then, supposing I hadn't any chance with her, after all—and I know that as little as I know the other—I should be spoiling everything, and nothing gained."

"I don't think that ought to deter you. You wouldn't want to go on as you are with them if they were like that. I don't see that we're justified in supposing that they are. There could only be one reason for it, and that would not show them in a very attractive light. They're so much better than I thought they were that I hesitate to believe that they'd behave like—well, like snobs."

She was arguing to convince herself. She knew they would not behave like snobs; and yet she didn't know in the least how they would behave.

Charles had been thinking. "Am I bound to go to Mr. French first?" he asked. "What on earth am I to say to him? 'May I ask your daughter to marry me?' Supposing he says no! I should ask her all the same, sooner or later?"

"Would you?"

"Of course I should, mother. That's settled, anyhow. Sooner or later."

"It's very difficult," she said. "I can't advise you; you wouldn't take my advice. But I can tell you, anyhow, what you may offer, besides yourself and your future. It wouldn't be much, I suppose, to people like that, who would have a right to expect something very splendid, if money weighed with them; but it would be enough. We settled some time ago, didn't we? that there was no reason for you to take up a profession for the sake of making money at it, if you preferred to work at something else. I always meant that to apply to your marrying, of course."

"Thank you, dear mother. You have always been very generous. It has worried me a little, lately. If I had worked at the Bar, I might have been on a road that pointed somewhere by now. As it is, I've nothing much to show. Fortunately, Ralph knows that I am aiming at something, and have worked pretty hard at it."

"You're doing exactly the same as he is. If he were to want to marry now, it would be a matter of an increased allowance. But I don't want it to be an allowance between us, Charles. The money that was left to me will all come to you some day. I want you to have half of it, at least, now. It is rather a burden to me. I have used it as well as I could, but I have never felt that I have been able to do anything with it for your dear father. Perhaps it has relieved him of all necessity of ever thinking about money, but as a matter of fact it has never made the slightest difference to us, except in what we have had to give away. With his writing, and his stipend, we have always had more than enough for the way in which it has suited us to live—even for your education and allowance since you left Cambridge. Do you know that at one time I actually hoped that you might have been a little extravagant, so that I might have the pleasure of paying debts for you?"

This entirely new light on his mother's ideals made Charles first stare at her, then laugh at her, then get up and embrace her. "I wish I'd known," he said. "I should have kept a horse. I think you would have been rather surprised, though, if I had run into debt."

"Well, perhaps I should. It wouldn't have been like you to do it. Still, it will be a very great pleasure to do something for you, and we'll set about it at once."

She told him what the sum was that she wanted to hand over to him. It was much more than he had thought of.

"Why, I shall be quite rich," he said. "Are you sure

it will be all right, mother? It is a very generous way of doing things, but a little unusual, isn't it? I don't see why I should be ashamed of taking an allowance from you, even a big one, if you can spare it, but——"

"I don't want it to be thought to come from me at all," she interrupted him. "If you are to obtain the happiness I want for you, if they behave in every way as they ought to, and no difficulties are put in the way, still questions about means must be asked. You are to say you have so much. That is all they will want to know, and all they need know. I don't suppose they have any idea that I have money of my own, apart from your father, and I don't want them to know."

She had not taken into account the persistence with which the rumour of money sticks, nor the active tongue of such as Gosset. She spoke with some vehemence.

"Why don't you want them to know, mother?"

"Well, you can see, can't you? That sweet girl being what she is, overrides everything. But I still wish that she were of our own people. They might not understand that. They might think that I wanted her for you partly because of their rank and what not. They would very likely think that I shouldn't have done so much for you if it had not been for that."

"Yes, I see," he said. "But I think you make too much of all that, mother. If there are people with great-grand-fathers who turn up their noses at us because we haven't got any, they're not worth troubling about. Most people take you for what you are nowadays, and nobody could think of *you* on the climb."

"Oh, my dear boy, you don't know how these pin-pricks can irritate. It's not because one wants to think about it; it's because one never would, if it weren't forced upon one at every turn. Should we be talking about it at all,

if your father had happened to be born of parents who went to church. He wouldn't have had to be different in any way. Mrs. Curtis told me the other day that the Bishop of Medchester was the son of a stationer in a small country town. Or even if he had 'gone over,' as they call it, as he very nearly did when he was at Oxford. I believe that both the Archbishops of the Church of England are of nonconformist stock; and one of them is the son of a Presbyterian minister. Nobody could doubt that your father would have been as well known in the Church as he is in our ministry. We should all have been exactly what we are, but we should have been looked up to instead of being considered as a sort of social pariahs. It ought not to be like that. It isn't, anywhere else in the world. But you can't get away from it, however much you may want to."

"Well, if it is so," said Charles, "it's the price you pay for taking an unpopular side. It isn't a bad thing for your health of mind."

"That is the way to look at it, of course," she said, more quietly. "And it never worried me much before. I don't know that I even realised it. But coming to a place like this has brought it home to me. Why, even that miserable creature, Miss Budd, used to turn up her nose at us when she met us in the street. I feel that we are out of place when such things can happen for such reasons."

"Father doesn't feel that," said Charles.

"No, not yet. I'm not sure that he won't. He is getting so much stronger and better. He may come to a point when he will feel that he wants a larger field. After all, preaching is the chief thing in our ministry. It is the fashion, at least in the Church, to decry it now; but with such a preacher as your father, there can't be much doubt

where his work lies, if he is strong enough to do it—where it has always lain, in influencing as large a number of people as possible.”

“Do you think he will want to go away?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t now. He is quite happy with his people, and with his writing. He said the other day that every minister ought to take a small country charge at some time or other, because it would teach him so much. But then he is not like other men. He has such humility with all his greatness.”

“I think that if more men of his reputation did do what he is doing, you wouldn’t have to complain so much of the incongruities you have discovered, mother. They would all say that the men who work in the country places are doing a noble work, but I’ve never heard of a single one of them doing it himself, except father. You won’t even find them in the slums of a big city, as you’ll find some of the well-known Churchmen. I think there’s something wrong about it all, you know. Too many cushions and too much respectability.”

“I don’t know about the slums. I think that’s changing, or likely to change. But in the country there isn’t enough scope for reaching a large number of people.”

“Well, then, you ought not to be surprised that so many people pass it over altogether, as not amounting to anything, for them. I don’t know how it is in other towns in England, but in London all the best-known men are in the respectable suburbs, or in places such as father was, which the same sort of people can get at easily. They don’t aim at the very poor, whom they could get in large numbers if they went where they lived, and they don’t aim at people of any high degree of intelligence, though some of them may attract them. They plump themselves into pure middle-class respectability, as such; and it isn’t very

surprising that that's the mark put upon them all through the country."

"I suppose it is the mark put upon *us*. I don't know why we should be ashamed of it. We are amongst our own people—the people we sprung from; and I can't feel that if we wanted to rise higher, it really *would* be rising higher. The people all around us here—in the country houses, I mean—aren't any more intelligent than quite ordinary middle-class people; they are much less intelligent than the circle of friends we had in London."

"No, but they're different, and there are a great many of them all over the country; they exercise more influence than other people. A Church that doesn't send its best men among the poor, and has no leverage over the rich, must be satisfied to be set down as the Church of a class, and its preachers must make the best of it. Of course, it's absurd to judge father like that. He's a prophet. He ought not to be identified with all the smugness. He never is, when people know him. Look how they all loved him to-night. Did you see the Rector's face when they came in together? They'd made friends. I was very glad of that."

He laughed. "If it were nothing but that I'm the son of my father, mother! Eh? I don't think there would be much to be afraid of."

The settlement that Mrs. Merrow had decided upon was made. Charles became a man of property, and was somewhat surprised to find that it made a difference in his outlook on life. He had to withdraw himself for a time from Roding to fulfil engagements in his constituency, and studied the phenomenon as he travelled up to London and down into the country again.

He did not quite like to acknowledge that it seemed to bring him closer to Sylvia. What had money got to do with it?

He came to the conclusion that it had nothing whatever to do with it, in respect of the way he had to make with her. He still hoped and feared alternately. There were a thousand sweet things to remember about her, which interfered seriously with the preparation necessary for the work that lay immediately in front of him; but there was nothing to give him any clear confidence. It was only that from being a young man very much in love he had become a young man, rather more in love than before, since a week had gone by, who was in a position to marry.

There is a great difference. Love may be satisfied to feed on itself, if it can get no other sustenance, but only for a time. Charles had already reached the point at which his anxieties were concerned not only with the question of whether he could win Sylvia. What was to happen if he did win her? The anxiety had not been acute, because he had never had to take questions of money into consideration, and it had seemed to him that it would be quite easy to earn it, if enough were not forthcoming. But there would be some sort of fence to surmount, and in prospect it had been big enough to prevent his looking forward to the future with a mind free from care.

But now, with all doubts on that score removed by his mother's generosity, his mind leapt eagerly forward, and a whole range of new delights came into vision. His income would be enough for a way of living out of which a young married couple could extract infinite pleasures. It would be enough for the most desirable little house in the country, with nothing lacking for either of them that would make country life attractive; or for a flat or a little house in London, whichever should be decided on. How delightful to talk it over! What fun to be got out of furnishing! How thrilling to settle down in the midst of accumulated treasures to a blissful domesticity, that would heighten

the pleasure and interest of every single thing that life contained! The glorious ideal of the home sprang up in his mind, never before realised; and it had been made possible for him because of his new possession of money, which he had hitherto been inclined to hold in small estimation.

A home, with Sylvia in it! Oh, if it could only be! Had the time come when the great risk could be run? Looking out at the country flying past, he longed to be with her that he might put it to the test.

He became very serious as he put it to himself now what his duty was with regard to her parents, and after a long time he came to the conclusion that he ought to approach them first. Otherwise, what would happen? He would go back to Roding, and be received once more with all kindness and confidence into the rectory family, and while they were thinking of him as the friend of all of them, he would be thinking of no one but Sylvia—much more of her alone than before, because he had moved on a stage and would now be in ardent pursuit of her. Either he must hide this from them, which was not a part he could play, or they would come to see it; and then they would either give him tacit permission to go on, or would act so as to prevent him doing so. Much better to give them his confidence frankly. Sooner or later, they must come in. If they should show themselves hostile, they would certainly not be less so if he ignored them.

When he reached his destination, he wrote a letter to the Rector, and another to Ralph.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOW THEY LOOKED AT IT

It happened that Charles's departure coincided with a day of rain and wind, which was the first that had spoilt the perfection of the now dying summer. The holidays were drawing to a close; it was well on into September, and the days had drawn in perceptibly. But except for the shorter evenings, and the free growth of the autumn flowers in the borders, there had been nothing to show that summer was on the wane. But now the first fall of leaves strewed the lawns, which were wet and sodden, the flowers all looked dragged, the river was grey and swollen. It was as if the long happy summer had suddenly come to an end, and would never have the strength to rally from this fierce assault and finish its milder course for the few weeks it still had to live.

There was gloom inside the rectory. Ronald, never at his happiest confined within walls, was loud in his lamentations. Even Ralph, who had arrears of correspondence to make up, which should have kept him busily employed all day, woke up to the fact that the last few weeks had been spent as pleasantly as any he had ever known, and felt depressed at the thought that they were over. Sylvia had gone to Farncombe to spend a few days with Myra, who had been staying at the rectory for nearly a month. He thought he would walk over to see them in the afternoon, in spite of the storm, and see if he could recapture a little of that sense of happy comradeship that had made the past weeks so delightful.

The talk over the depleted luncheon-table was of little but the days that were over. If Charles could have heard it, it would have gratified him to hear how much he was missed; but he might have felt a trifle nervous if he had observed the expression on the face of the Rector, who seemed gradually to be awakening to an idea not altogether agreeable to him.

Ralph went into his study with him after luncheon, to smoke a pipe. The Rector seemed to be as much depressed over the state of the weather as anybody, and to have less hope than Ralph that it would permanently clear again.

"I'm afraid you've had the last of your expeditions," he said. "You've rather forsaken the partridges this year, Ralph. "You've only been out once, haven't you?"

"I thought they could wait a bit," said Ralph, "as there are so few of them this year. It has been so jolly on the river. I've never enjoyed it so much before. I hope we shall have a few more days when Sylvia comes back, and Merrow."

The Rector's face darkened a little. "I like Merrow," he said, "and have been glad to see him here. But it has just occurred to me that for him to be so much with Sylvia as he has been lately may be a little unwise. I'm not altogether sorry that your pleasant little party has broken up."

"Oh, but there's nothing of that sort," said Ralph. "We have all been very jolly together, and that's all."

"Are you quite sure of that? These things often come as a surprise, you know, to people who have had every opportunity of seeing what's going on."

"It has never occurred to me," said Ralph, after a pause.

"But now it's suggested?"

"Merrow is absolutely straight. He has been coming here chiefly as my friend, and we made a sort of compact

that we would keep things going so that Ronald, especially, shouldn't go about in the town so much as he generally does. I don't think Merrow would think he had a right to make love to Sylvia, if that is what you mean."

"No, I don't mean anything nearly so definite as that. But being with her so much, he might become attracted by her. Sylvia is a very attractive girl, Ralph. I know that brothers don't see these things as plainly as outsiders, but you can probably tell whether he has shown himself at all attracted in that way."

"Well, I'm not sure that he isn't. But, if he is, I don't believe she knows anything about it."

"H'm! It wouldn't do, you know, Ralph."

Ralph was silent.

The Rector threw a glance at him. "I know you've made great friends with him," he said, "and I've nothing but liking for him myself, personally. But Sylvia's different."

"I don't think she wants to marry Pangbourne."

"Why don't you think so?"

"She said she had never enjoyed herself more than during the last month, and hated the idea of going away later on. She wouldn't feel like that if she wanted to meet him, as she will."

"I think it's quite likely she won't want to marry Pangbourne. But I hope to goodness she won't want to marry Charles Merrow. I'm not sure that it has been wise to throw them so much together."

"Supposing she did! I've no reason to say she thinks of him in that way; I don't believe she does. But if she did, shouldn't you allow it?"

"I haven't got nearly as far as that yet. I've only just got my eyes open to the possibility of such a thing. But don't you think the same as I do about it? We don't

want a big match for Sylvia; one wouldn't put the very smallest pressure on her to marry Pangbourne, for instance. But she ought to marry among the people to whom she belongs."

Ralph seemed as if he could not make up his mind on the question. It was *his* face now that was set in a frown. "I suppose a girl ought to," he said. "I've never thought about it. And yet, I'm not so sure. If a man marries a girl who is all right in every other way, you don't mind much if her people aren't quite the same as his. I don't quite see why it shouldn't be the same for the girl, speaking generally. I'm not thinking about Sylvia. I really don't know what to think about that."

"You must know whether you like the idea of such a thing for her."

"Then perhaps what I feel about it is that I wish Merrow did come from the same sort of stock as we do. I like him as much as any fellow I've ever known. Perhaps I like him all the better because his surroundings have been a bit different. But as for any real differences, which could make you say he was beneath us in any way, I can't see them. Can you?"

"No. Except that he's a Radical and a Dissenter."

"I shouldn't call him a Dissenter. He goes to the chapel here because of his father. He told me that they had a definite act of membership amongst them, and he had never made it."

"That probably means that he is a free-thinker. One wouldn't want one's daughter to marry a free-thinker."

"Well, what about Pangbourne? He has written a book. I'm quite sure Merrow believes every bit as much as *he* does. I suppose you'd call Pangbourne a philosopher; but you might just as easily call him a free-thinker."

"Yes, I suppose you might. One must be fair, and I

admit that it would be more distasteful to me to have my daughter marry an ardent Dissenter than a philosopher—as long as the philosopher wasn't definitely at enmity with Christianity. One would try to prevent that, whatever position he held in the world."

"Yes, of course. But Merrow isn't like that. He's a Christian. He isn't a Churchman, but so many fellows who think about things wouldn't be, if they hadn't happened to have been brought up to it. It wouldn't make any practical difference; none at all to whom ever he married. And he'll get up pretty high, too, I should think. There are men who are in office in this Government who weren't much before us at Oxford and Cambridge. In a few years' time he'll be in a position in which he might marry anybody. If it does come, father, I don't think you'd be sorry, later on. Of course, it wouldn't be exactly what you'd look for for Sylvia now."

"It wouldn't be in the least what I should look for for Sylvia," said the Rector, ending the conversation.

He was rather disturbed by the way Ralph had taken the idea, and thought about it a good deal that afternoon as he went about his parish. It seemed to him that Ralph was on the way to arguing himself into the conviction that such a marriage was desirable. He was not disposed to blame him. He was loyal to his friend, and would probably even welcome him as a brother-in-law. That he saw nothing incongruous in such a marriage, or at least nothing that would override other considerations, only showed that he put a low value on mere social distinction, which was a virtue in a young man. Whether it would be a virtue in a middle-aged one, the father of a beautiful girl, who could claim of right everything that might come from a brilliant marriage, was another question. He knew what the world would think of such a marriage, and dreaded what

the world would say. It might even connect it with the shadow that had been cast upon himself, and that was a painful thought. He hoped very much that there was nothing in it. They had been talking as if it was a question that had to be decided; but it certainly could not have moved very far, if it had moved at all, and with young Merrow away now, and Sylvia going away in a week or two for some time to places where she would not be subjected to such dangers, it was to be hoped that this one would disappear.

Ralph went over to Farncombe, and managed to get a minute or two alone with Myra, to whom, as a very intimate friend both of Sylvia's and his, he put the question—had she noticed anything?

She laughed at him. "You must have been blind," she said, "if you couldn't see that he is head over ears."

This gave him rather a shock. "But what about Sylvia?" he asked, when he had digested it.

"Oh, I can't tell you anything about that," said Myra, closing her petals.

"You mean you won't."

"No, I don't. Of course she likes him. So do I. So do you."

He did not know how much she had told him, and went away unsatisfied, as far as knowledge of Sylvia's feelings was concerned. But it seemed to him more than ever unreasonable that questions of birth should weigh so much in questions of marriage, with girls, when they weighed so little with men. Supposing he took it into his head, for instance, to marry Myra Curtis, nobody would think it unsuitable. Yet her birth was no more exalted than Charles Merrow's.

The Rector unbosomed himself to his wife. Had she noticed anything? Wasn't it rather dangerous to have

young Merrow so constantly in the house? He had almost lived there during the last few weeks.

"I think he is in love with Sylvia," she said seriously, "but I don't think she has any idea of it yet."

He stared at her. "My dear girl," he said, "why didn't you tell me? Why did you let him go on coming here? Surely you don't want such a thing to happen!"

"I don't want her to marry Lord Pangbourne," she said, with decision.

He had an access of depression. "We talked over that," he said. "Nothing has happened since, has it?"

"Nothing except that I have come to see so plainly that there is only one reason why we should want her to marry him, and it doesn't seem to me a good reason."

"You mean because he is what he is. But that wouldn't have weighed with us if we didn't know what a good fellow he was, and that she would have had every chance of being happy with him."

"She doesn't feel that. I know her so well, Henry. She has never mentioned his name to me since she came home, but I can see that it is weighing on her that she will be going where she will meet him and will have to decide. He is old to her; she is such a child still. It would be the end of her youth to marry him. She has enjoyed herself immensely going about everywhere, but she isn't really cut out for such a life. I think she is even getting a little tired of it. She has enjoyed the quiet life we have been living here lately more than anything. And she doesn't love him. When you have said that, perhaps you have said everything."

The Rector sighed. "Well, my dear," he said. "We'll give up the idea of her marrying Pangbourne. If you think it weighs on her, I will write to him."

"Oh, do, Henry! It will be such a relief to the poor child to have it ended."

"Very well. But now about young Merrow. That's a very different thing. You wouldn't do anything to encourage that idea, would you?"

"No, not to encourage it. But, Henry dear, don't you think that with a girl so good and sweet as Sylvia, one ought to leave things to take their course? She would never marry any one who was not worthy of her. She would shrink instinctively from any man who was not good. I think that girls so simple and natural, so absolutely unspoilt as she is, have something in them that we who are older have lost—something that guides them, and keeps them from making mistakes about men."

"I've nothing against young Merrow personally," said the Rector, rather weakly.

"I have watched him constantly," she said. "At first I suppose I thought much as you do. We had had other ideas for Sylvia. If Lord Pangbourne had been younger, not married before, if she had loved him, it was the sort of marriage we should have expected for her. And Mr. Merrow could not give her what he could, or others like him. But does she want that? Do we want it for her, very much? Is it necessary for her happiness, which is the chief thing with us?"

"Wealth and position wouldn't be necessary for her happiness, although I'm not going to say that we should be wrong in taking them into account. They are good things if they are used rightly, and benefit the world. The wife of a man who had them would have opportunities—not only of enjoying herself. I should not be afraid of Sylvia being spoilt if she made a good match."

"No, but you wouldn't think they were of the chief importance. If the younger son of a well-known family, for

instance, wanted to marry Sylvia, and she loved him, you would think that a suitable match."

"It is the match *you* made, my dear. You might have been a great lady."

"I'm sure I shouldn't have been so happy, dearest. I have enjoyed going about, and being in London sometimes, but only because I haven't had too much of it. I like living at home here quietly much better, and since we have been very quiet I have loved my life all the more. I have learnt so much of what makes for true happiness."

He took her hand, and was silent for some time. "We have both learnt a good deal, haven't we?" he said. "I don't want to forget it, Ruth, in this new complication. It has some bearing on it. The things in the world that make for pride—you have never been touched by them, my dear, and I have come to value them much less than I did. It is difficult to get rid of one's prejudices all at once. It has always seemed natural that one should hope for a good marriage for one's daughter, situated as we are, and I don't know that there's anything to be ashamed of in it, as long as one doesn't desire it over-much. What you say about Sylvia making the same sort of marriage as you did is quite true. One would look only at the character of the man, and let the rest slide easily enough. But young Merrow isn't in that position. We know nothing at all about his relations, if he has any, but in marrying him Sylvia would be going quite outside the people she belongs to. Would that be what we should want for her? I'm sure Alice wouldn't want it. She would be horrified at the idea of such a match."

Alice was Lady Hampshire, who was devoted to Sylvia.

"I have thought a good deal about that," said Lady Ruth. "I think that if Mr. Merrow had been quite obviously of a class much below our own it would have mattered. But

in that case I think he would have had no chance with Sylvia. She would not be likely to care for a man whose ways were not those of the men she has known. But he is not different from other young men whom one knows and likes. Ralph couldn't make such a friend of him if he were. If she were to marry him she would not be cut off from her own friends, who would like him as much as we do. I am sure Alice would like him."

"Don't you feel at all disturbed at the idea? Are you ready to welcome it? It would bring us very closely into touch with the Merrows. Dr. Merrow is a man no one could help liking and admiring when once they knew him, but you don't care much for *her*, do you?"

"I like her much better than I did. As for him, I think he is a dear man, whom everybody must love. I don't know anything about his birth, but he is the truest kind of gentleman. See what he has done with the people here in the short time he has been at Roding."

"Yes, that's extraordinary. If it hadn't been for him, Gosset and his followers would probably have done their best to drive us out of the place. We owe him a great deal, I know. Do we owe him our daughter, Ruth? Is it because of what has happened at all that you think this marriage is possible? Would you have thought of it in quite the same way six months ago?"

She smiled at him. "It is not gratitude to Dr. Merrow that has influenced me," she said.

"Is it anything else that has to do with what has happened?"

"Dear Henry, what happened has cleared up my thoughts about a great many things. Love is such a great thing between a man and a woman. It can bring more happiness than anything else if it is the right sort of love, and it can bring so much unhappiness if it isn't. It is difficult

to judge sometimes, but I have become more and more sure that with dear Sylvia the safest thing is to leave it entirely to her. With her goodness and innocence I'm sure she can't go wrong. So I say let her choice be our choice for her. It may not be Mr. Merrow at all; but if it is, I should like her to find us just as happy about it as she would be herself."

He rose and kissed her. "You are a conjurer," he said. "But I must hear first what Richard has to say about it."

Sir Richard was returning home that day. For a wonder, he had written to announce his intention. The Rector went over to the Court to see him the next morning. Summer had come back again, and they walked together in the garden.

"Well, that's rather a startler, Henry," he said, when the Rector had disclosed possibilities to him. "There's no man I have a greater liking for than Dr. Merrow, and I like his son, what little I've seen of him, though I don't think he's the equal of his father. But as a husband for Sylvia—well, that *is* rather a startler."

"Yes, it startled me," said the Rector. "But it doesn't seem to have startled Ruth."

"Ah! what does she say about it?"

The Rector told him.

"Then I think that settles it," he said. "If Ruth thinks of him in that way, he's the right sort of fellow in himself. She knows. And, as for all the rest, if it doesn't disturb *her*, we should be a couple of snobs if we let it disturb *us*."

Charles's letters came by the afternoon post. He had thought of them as throwing a bombshell into a peaceful family. But the work of the bomb had already been effected.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE LAST

THE dusk of a fine October evening was beginning to fall. Dr. Merrow was coming home from a long walk along the muddy country roads. He had gone round by Farncombe and across to Roding Court, and was returning by the other road. It was a round of nearly seven miles, and it rejoiced him to find he could take it without more fatigue than it was good to feel after exercise.

What Mrs. Merrow had prophesied for him had come about, but much sooner than she had expected. In September he had had an invitation to preach in a great town in the north of England, and had felt well enough to accept it. He had returned to Roding with the thought that, now that his health was so much restored, the opportunity for a wider sphere of service must be considered, if it should come. A call had come shortly afterwards from the congregation to which he had preached, but his doctor had warned him against settling in the north. He had not forbidden him, however, to look forward to undertaking more work, if he could do it in a climate that would suit him. He had found him wonderfully restored, but advised him not to make any change for the present. Let them see how he could stand the winter.

In any case he would not have left Roding without completing his year's ministry there, but he could not any longer regard it as giving him scope for the full work he once more felt fitted to do.

His preaching in the northern town had been an event.

He had, as it were, come to life again. Invitations poured in on him to preach here and there, but he refused them all. He would give himself up to the dear people in Roding as long as he remained with them.

Then he had been offered a church in a big town in the west. His doctor said he might go there, if he should get through the winter without losing ground. He and Mrs. Merrow had just come back from visiting the place, and he had written his conditional acceptance that morning.

He was not a man to attach himself overmuch to places. Wherever sinning, suffering, struggling humanity was gathered together he would be happy in ministering to it, and would cast no regrets towards other scenes. But as he walked along the country roads and lanes his heart went out to this quiet place, so far removed from the visible turmoil of the world, and he was glad that the time had not yet come when he must leave it.

He had learnt so much in Roding. He had come closer to the heart of his people than he had ever come before, and he looked forward to his coming ministry not only as an opportunity for influencing the large number of people who would come to hear him preach, but for going about amongst those who would be glad to see him—the poor, who would want him still more in a big city than they wanted him in Roding. He would make his church a church of the poor, and he would bring them in by making friends with them outside it. It was so easy to make friends with them, and they made such good friends. How much he had learnt from them here in Roding during the few months he had been with them! His work was to be largely pastoral work—not serving of tables; he would leave that to others,—but the message was to be taken to those who most wanted it; he had made that plain in talk with the officers of the church. There were to be no cushions; no

pew-rents. Those who wanted to worship God and keep their exclusive respectability at the same time, might go elsewhere. The deacons had laughed at him because of the way he had put it, and agreed to everything he wished. Some of them were doubtful of the wisdom of such innovations, but they were so glad of the chance of having him that they would have agreed to anything.

His thoughts came back to Roding. They were very different from those he had had about it when he had first come. He had gone through deep experiences in Roding. He had seen his labours flower amongst his little flock as he had never been permitted to see them flower before. He thought of the people whom he had seen in front of him Sunday by Sunday, not as a body of hearers, but as men and women and children whom he knew individually, the lives of many of whom he knew, with their joys and troubles, their temptations and their strivings. He had felt great power given him to deal with people whom he knew in this way. It had flowed from him and illumined his preaching as he thought it had never been illumined. And the fruits had fallen to him.

He thought of Gosset, with his keen sense of the beauty of holiness, and the deep-seated perversions of nature which might make him a very rock of offence against all that he held in reverence. Deep-seated, yes; but not so deep but that the grace of God could plumb them. Gosset had changed under his eyes. His own eyes had been opened; he had seen the vision the most difficult of all to capture—the truth about himself; not fully, perhaps, as yet, but enough to turn him from an engine of strife and bitterness into a minister of peace.

His thoughts turned to the rectory people, and brightened. The human in him found them more agreeable in contemplation than Gosset, even than Gosset transformed.

But the sense of divine power working there came to him strongly. How God had stretched out his hand,—to scourge, to heal, to subdue,—to bring out the good that was there in such overflowing measure, but had needed this shaking up to free it from the dross with which it was alloyed.

His feeling towards the Rector was of the warmest. He had known that he had not taken to him at first, and the way in which he treated him now was all the more gratifying. He knew that he had been able to help him—that the difficulties he had gone through would have been greater if it had not been for his help; and he knew that the Rector knew it. They could never, perhaps, be very intimate friends, but friends they were, and the proof of it was the way in which the Rector had talked to him about his son.

Dr. Merrow had never been more surprised in his life than when he had heard that Charles was in love with Sylvia French, that he had told her parents so, and that they would put no difficulties in the way of his winning her, if he could. It was the Rector who had told him. Charles was to have his chance. It was unlikely that she was ready for a declaration from him yet, and nothing would be said to her by her parents. He must make his own way with her; but he would have opportunities of doing so, and might take them under no sense of disapproval.

Dr. Merrow had gone home from the interview full of joy at this surprising new development. His well-beloved son, who deserved all the good in life that could come to him, and that sweet girl, whom he loved like a father already! He did not doubt but that Charles would win her. He thought very highly of his son.

He was as little concerned with social differences as any man could be; but he knew that in the ordinary way

of things a marriage proposal of this sort would not be welcomed by people who stood where the Frenches did. He had had a little word with Lady Ruth about it, and she had gone further than the Rector, and had said that she hoped it might come about; she believed that it would be for her daughter's happiness. He thought he saw very plainly that they had not been without the doubts that they might have been expected to feel, and had put them aside as unworthy of them. From what he knew of Lady Ruth, that might have been expected. The world with which she had mingled so freely was little to her; her mind was set on higher things. But for her husband it must have been a struggle, although no signs of it had shown in the general way in which he had given Dr. Merrow the news. Could there be a plainer token than this of the change in him? It was so much more difficult to subdue the sort of pride that could hardly be looked upon as a fault, than the pride that showed itself plainly as a sin. It was the very spirit of pride that had been conquered.

Lady Ruth had asked him to tell Mrs. Merrow. They had heard from Charles the day before, and had written to him that day.

Mrs. Merrow was moved by his news. "I never expected anything so good as that," she said. "I hoped they might come to accept the idea in time; I never thought that they would hold out no objections at all. I'm ashamed of having ever said or thought anything against either of them. They ring true at every turn."

This had been a month ago. Charles had come back, and for one blissful week of relenting summer had had his opportunities. To his father, eagerly impatient now for the crown to be put upon his hopes, his slowness had been disappointing. But his mother knew better. Such a girl was not to be won without wooing.

Sylvia had gone away, with nothing said. Charles had left them, not visibly downcast. He would meet her at at least one of the houses to which she was going; they would both be at Roding at Christmas-time. It was a long time to wait, but perhaps something would happen then to brighten the New Year. Dr. Merrow smiled as he looked forward to that time. His faith was quite capable of embracing such a matter as this.

He came to George Barton's cottage. There was a litter of straw in the usually tidy little front garden. It reminded him of the coming departure of this young man, whom he had actually never met; but his sympathetic mind drooped at the thought of one who was going to leave Roding, where there was so much happiness just at present.

He had never quite understood about George. He had seen him sometimes in the street, and had thought he did not wish to know him. His impression of him, drawn entirely from what had happened just after his own arrival, with Percy Gosset, was that he cherished some such dislike towards the chapel as Gosset had cherished towards the church. It was an attitude that was not uncommon amongst young curates, and Dr. Merrow would never have been the first to make overtures to one. If this young man had wanted to know him he could easily have done so. Now he was going away to Australia, and the general impression seemed to be that he was going there because he wanted to spend more of his time on horseback.

But he was liked in Roding; people were sorry he was going, even the people of Dr. Merrow's own flock, who all spoke well of him, and none of them as if he were quite like what Dr. Merrow had pictured him. And at the rectory they had talked about him with great affection, and little Joyce, when he had seen her, had talked about nobody else. Dr. Merrow wished that he had known him. What-

ever his reasons for going abroad, there was work to be done for God there, and he would have liked to talk to him about it. Perhaps, with his sporting tastes, he had mistaken his vocation; but he was committed to it now, and a word of encouragement might help him.

As he passed the cottage he remembered that he had also passed the field path that made a short-cut to his house, and turned back. He was always thankful afterwards that he had done so, and not gone by the road.

It was now nearly dusk, and he heard before he saw a horse trotting along the road by which he had come. The rider was George, and as he pulled up at the entrance to his stable-yard he saw Dr. Merrow. He seemed to hesitate for a moment and then got off his horse, and said: "Dr. Merrow, we have never spoken to one another, but I am going away from Roding to-morrow, and sailing from England on Friday, and I don't want to go without telling you that I owe a lot to you; and thanking you."

Dr. Merrow's surprise was greater than he had felt when the Rector had told him the news about Charles. This young man, standing before him in his riding-clothes, his boots splashed, his coat flecked with the foam that the impatient animal he was holding threw from his champing bit—the type of all that he, perhaps, least understood amongst the youthful clergy—whom he had never spoken to—what could he owe to him? He could only show his surprise, while at the same time showing his pleasure at being thus accosted.

"I was just thinking of you, and feeling sorry you were going away, and wishing I knew you," he said. "I am very glad that I may know you, even at the last moment."

George's face showed relief. "I always hoped there had been some mistake," he said. "I have wanted to know you ever since you came here."

George's groom came out and took the horse. "Will you come in and have some tea?" George said. "I am staying at the rectory, but I have some packing to do here. Everything is in an awful mess, I'm afraid."

They went into the once cosy sitting-room, now a scene of desolation, with carpets up, walls denuded of pictures, shelves empty. But there was a bright fire, and chairs and a tea-table in front of it.

"I did come and call on you, you know," said George, "when you first came. You weren't well then; but afterwards, when you didn't return my call, I thought, perhaps, you might have misunderstood something that had happened—with Percy Gosset, you know."

Dr. Merrow was full of distress at the thought of having acted discourteously, and still more at the thought that any failure to do what had been required had kept him from knowing George all this time. He showed his distress plainly. "But I didn't understand," he said. "Yes, you did call on me, didn't you? My wife—she must have made some mistake—she didn't—I must ask her when I get home. But it's dreadful that you should have thought I wanted to keep aloof from you. I'm afraid I thought the same of you."

George cut short his expressions of regret. He saw that he had to thank Mrs. Merrow for the misunderstanding, which still he did not quite understand. "Well, it doesn't matter now," he said. "We needn't waste time in wondering how it happened. I'm so glad to see you to speak to before I go away. It is a good deal owing to you that I am going."

Dr. Merrow smiled at him. "That is as puzzling to me as the other. You must tell me how it came about."

George told him—of his thoughts before he had taken Orders, of his thoughts afterwards; how his ideas of the

life he was called upon to lead had gradually changed, and how the impulse to leave his comfortable surroundings and go out into the world, wherever he should be led, had come from the sermon he had heard Dr. Merrow preach in London.

"I don't think it was anything in particular that you said—nothing that had any direct bearing on what was in my mind. But it made the difference; it cleared up my doubts. I knew when I came back here that I shouldn't stay very long. I was content to wait till I saw plainly what I ought to do. I knew, somehow, that the way would be shown me. I had given myself up, and all I had to do was to be ready to take it."

Dr. Merrow was profoundly moved; the tears were very near his eyes. The simplicity with which the story had been told, the self-surrender, the ungrudging readiness to give up what it was plain was very dear, the sparks applied to the tinder that had so honestly been kept dry for it, and the patient waiting for guidance—and all this going on under his own eyes, which had been shut to it—drew him strangely. Here was a spirit, which he recognised as the highest, working in a medium unlike any that he had ever known.

"Oh, it is so good to hear it all," he said, "and it gives me great pain to think that I might have heard it before, when you were waiting for the light to come, and we might have waited for it in faith together, and through some fault of mine we were kept apart. But tell me, dear friend, how the light came, how you were shown that it was right that you should go where you are going."

"I don't think that it was through any fault of yours that we were kept apart," said George with a smile. "Perhaps, in a way, it was best. I had to decide for myself. I am not sure that you would have advised me to do what I am going to do."

Dr. Merrow thought of what he had heard and smiled in his turn, at the idea of this young man, who had everything that best pleased him in life—apart from his great purpose—where he was, leaving it all to go to the ends of the world for the sake of more horse-exercise. He knew now something of what it cost him to make the change; he had not dwelt on it, but it had been inherent in everything he had said.

George told him of the reasons that had led him, much in the same way as he had told them to Ronald. Dr. Merrow saw into him more and more plainly as the ingenuous explanation came out. His was one of those natures, simple with the beautiful simplicity of children, which Christ had prescribed to his followers as the highest state to which they could attain. Christ had called him to his service, and he had given himself gladly, with all that he had. He "got on" with men and boys. That gift was to be dedicated. He was "a good man on a horse." He had not thought that natural acquirement unworthy of being used in God's service. He had "more money than he knew what to do with." He was ready to do with it whatever should be shown him.

Dr. Merrow never forgot the talk that followed. As he walked home an hour later, he felt as if he had come from the presence of one in whom the wonderful workings of God's spirit were plainly manifest. There was purpose as firm as a rock, the purest faith, the most absolute self-surrender. He could have wept for the thought of how he had misjudged, but for the joy that filled him at what he had been permitted to see.

What miracles of Grace he had seen during the few months he had been in this place! Where there had been sorrow there was hope, where there had been strife there

was peace; faith had taken the place of doubt, humility of pride. Everywhere material to be transformed by the Holy Spirit of God; nothing common or unclean, that he had made in his likeness. He felt, as he walked along the damp meadow path, that he was treading on holy ground.

THE END





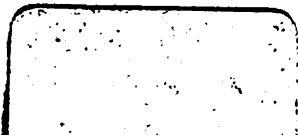
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